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NIGHT=
RIDERS



RIDGWELL CULLUM

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THE NIGHT-RIDERS

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THE DEVIL'S KEG

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THE NIGHT-RIDERS

A ROMANCE OF WESTERN CANADA

BY

RIDGWELL CULLUM

AUTHOR OF "THE DEVIL'S KEG," ETC.

TORONTO

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THE NIGHT-RIDERS

CHAPTER I

IN THE HANDS OF THE PHILISTINES

FORKS SETTLEMENT no longer occupies its place upon the ordnance map of the Canadian North-west Territories. At least not *the* Forks Settlement—the one which nestled in a hollow on the plains of Southern Alberta, beneath the shadow of the Rocky Mountains. It is curious how these little places do contrive to slip off the map in the course of time. There is no doubt but that they do, and are wholly forgotten, except, perhaps, by those who actually lived or visited there. It is this way with all new countries, and anywhere from twenty to thirty years ago the North-west Territories was distinctly a new country.

It was about '85 that Forks Settlement enjoyed the height of its prosperity—a prosperity based on a traffic against the laws of Prohibition, and the supply of dry goods and machinery to a widely scattered and sparse population of small ranchers and farmers. These things brought it into existence and kept it afloat. But its wreck was looming. The heavy hand of the police was obtaining that hold upon the country which, later, was to herd all those who lived against the law into the capacious maw of Stony Mountain Penitentiary. Already the official eye was on the place; and Forks Settlement knew it. But the people were old-time sinners. They would play the game to a finish, and “raise the pot” every time.

When John Tresler rode into Forks he wondered what

rural retreat he had chanced upon. He didn't wonder in those words, his language was much more derogatory to the place than that.

It was late one afternoon when his horse ambled gently on to the green patch which served Forks as a market-place. He drew up and looked around him for some one to give him information. The place was quite deserted. It was a roasting hot day, and the people of Forks were not given to moving about much on hot days, unless imperative business claimed them. As there were only two seasons in the year when such a thing was likely to happen, and this was not one of them, no one was stirring.

The sky was unshaded by a single cloud. Tresler was tired, stiff, and consumed by a sponge-like thirst, for he was unused to long hours in the saddle. And he had found a dreary monotony in riding over the endless prairie lands of the West.

Now he found himself surrounded by an uncertain circle of wooden houses. None of them suggested luxury, but after the heaving rollers of grass-land they suggested companionship and life. And just now that was all the horseman cared about.

He surveyed each house in turn, searching for a single human face. And at last he beheld a window full of faces staring curiously at him from the far side of the circle. It was enough. Touching his jaded horse's flanks he rode over towards it.

Further life appeared now in the form of a small man who edged shyly round the angle of the building and stood gazing at him. The stranger was a queer figure. His face was as brown as the surface of a prairie trail and as scored with ruts. His long hair and flowing beard were the colour of matured hay. His dress was simple, and in keeping with his face; moleskin trousers, worn and soiled, a blue serge shirt, a shabby black jacket, and a fiery handkerchief about his neck, while a battered prairie hat adorned the back of his head.

Tresler pulled his horse up before this welcome vision and slid stiffly to the ground, while the little man slanted his eyes over his general outfit.

"Is this Forks Settlement?" the new-comer asked, with an ingratiating smile. He was a manly looking fellow with black hair and steel-blue eyes; he was dressed in a plain Norfolk jacket and riding kit. He was not particularly handsome, but possessed a strong, reliant face.

The stranger closed his eyes in token of acquiescence.

"Ur-hum," he murmured.

"Will you point me out the hotel?"

The other's eyes had finally settled themselves on the magnificent pair of balloon-shaped corduroy riding-breeches Tresler was wearing, and which had now re-settled themselves into their natural voluminous mould.

He made no audible reply. He was engrossed with the novel vision before him. A backward jerk of the head was the only sign he permitted himself.

Tresler looked at the house indicated. He felt in some doubt, and not without reason. The place was a mere two-storied shanty, all askew and generally unpromising.

"Can I—that is, does the proprietor take—er—guests?" he asked.

"Guess Carney takes most anythin'," came the easy reply.

The door of the hotel opened and two men came out, eyeing the new-comer and his horse critically. Then they propped themselves in leisurely fashion against the door-casing, and chewed silently, while they gazed abroad with marked unconcern.

Tresler hazarded another question. He felt strange in this company. It was his first real acquaintance with a prairie settlement, and he didn't quite know what to expect.

"I wonder if there is any one to see to my horse," he said with some hesitation.

"Hitch him to the tie-post an' ast in ther'" observed the

uncommunicative man, pointing to a post a few yards from the door, but without losing interest in the other's nether garments.

"That sounds reasonable."

Tresler moved off and secured his horse and loosened the saddle girths.

"Pardon me, sir," he said, when he came back, his well-trimmed six feet towering over the other's five feet four. "Might I ask whom I have the pleasure of addressing? My name is John Tresler; I am on my way to Mosquito Bend, Julian Marbolt's ranch. A stranger, you see, in a strange land. No doubt you have observed that already," he finished up good-naturedly.

But the other's attention was not to be diverted from the interesting spectacle of the corduroys, and he answered without shifting his gaze.

"My name's Ranks—gener'ly called 'Slum.' Howdy."

"Well, Mr. Ranks——"

"Gener'ly called 'Slum,'" interrupted the other.

"Mr. Slum, then——" Tresler smiled.

"Slum!"

The man's emphasis was marked. There was no cheating him of his due. "Slum" was his sobriquet by the courtesy of prairie custom. "Ranks" was purely a paternal heirloom and of no consequence at all.

"Well, Slum," Tresler laughed, "suppose we go and sample Carney's refreshments. I'm tired, and possess a thirst."

He stepped towards the doorway and looked back. Mr. Ranks had not moved. Only his wondering eyes had followed the other's movements.

"Won't you join me?" Tresler asked. Then, noting the fixed stare in the man's eyes, he went on with some impatience, "What the dickens are you staring at?" And, in self-defence, he was forced into a survey of his own riding-breeches.

Slum looked up. A twinkle of amusement shone beneath his heavy brows, while a broad grin parted the hair on his face.

"Oh, jest nothin'," he said amiably. "I wer' kind o' figgerin' out what sort of a feller them pants o' yours wus made for." He doused the brown earth at his feet with tobacco juice. Then shaking his head thoughtfully, a look of solemn wonder replaced the grin. "Say," he added, "but, he must a' bin a dandy chunk of a man."

Tresler was about to reply. But a glance at Mr. Ranks, and an audible snigger coming from the doorway, suddenly changed his mind. He swung round to face a howl of laughter; and he understood.

"The drinks are on me," he said with some chagrin. "Come on, all of you. Yes, I'm a 'tenderfoot.'"

And it was the geniality of his reply that won him a place in the society of Forks Settlement at once. In five minutes his horse was stabled and cared for. In five minutes he was addressing the occupants of the saloon by their familiar nick-names. In five minutes he was paying for smuggled whisky at an exorbitant price. In five minutes—well, he sniffed his first breath of prairie habits and prairie ways.

It is not necessary to delve deeply into the characters of these citizens of Forks. It is not good to rake bad soil, the process is always offensive. A mere outline is alone necessary. Ike Carney purveyed smuggled liquor. A little man with quick, cunning eyes, and a mouth that shut tight under a close-cut fringe of grey moustache. "Shaky" Pindle, the carpenter, was a sad-eyed man who looked as gentle as a disguised wolf. His big, scarred face never smiled, because, his friends said, it was a physical impossibility for it to do so, and his huge, rough body was as uncouth as his manners, and as unwieldy as his slow-moving tongue. Taylor, otherwise "Twirly," the butcher, was a man so genial and rubicund that in five minutes you began to wish that he was built like the lower animals that have no means of giving audible expression to their good-humour, or, if they have, there is no necessity to notice it except by a well-directed kick. And Slum, quiet, unsophisticated Slum, shadier than the shadiest of them all, but a man who took the keenest

delight in the humours of life, and who did wrong from an inordinate delight in besting his neighbours. A man to smile at, but to avoid.

These were the men John Tresler, fresh from England and a generous home, found himself associated with while he rested on his way to Mosquito Bend.

Ike Carney laid himself out to be pleasant.

"Goin' to Skitter Bend?" he observed, as he handed his new guest the change out of a one hundred dollar bill. "Wal, it's a tidy lay-out;—ninety-five dollars, mister; a dollar a drink. You'll find that c'rect—best ranch around these parts. Say," he went on, "the ol' blind hoss has hunched it together pretty neat. I'll say that."

"Blind mule," put in Slum, vaulting to a seat on the bar.

"Mule?" questioned Shaky, with profound scorn. "Guess you ain't worked around his lay-out, Slum. Skunk's my notion of him. I 'lows his kickin's most like a mule's, but ther' ain't nothin' m're to the likeness. A mule's a hard-workin', decent cit'zen, which ain't off'n said o' Julian Marbolt."

Shaky swung a leg over the back of a chair and sat down with his arms folded across it, and his heavy bearded chin resting upon them.

"But you can't expect a blind man to be the essence of amiability," said Tresler. "Think of his condition."

"See here, young feller," jerked in Shaky, thrusting his chin-beard forward aggressively. "Condition ain't to be figgered on when a man kep's a great hulkin', bull-dozin' swine of a foreman like Jake Harnach. Say, them two, the blind skunk an' Jake, ken raise more hell in five minutes around that ranch than a tribe o' neches on the warpath. I built a barn on that place last summer, an' I guess I know."

"Comforting for me," observed Tresler, with a laugh.

"Oh, you ain't like to git his rough edge," put in Carney, easily.

"Guess you're payin' a premium?" asked Shaky.

"I'm going to have three years' teaching."

"Three years o' Skitter Bend?" said Slum, quietly. "Guess you'll learn a deal in three years o' Skitter Bend."

The little man chewed the end of a cigar Tresler had presented him with, while his twinkling eyes exchanged meaning glances with his comrades. Twirly laughed loudly and backed against the bar, stretching out his arms on either side of him, and gripping its moulded edge with his beefy hands.

"An' you're payin' fer that teachin'?" the butcher asked incredulously, when his mirth had subsided.

"It seems the custom in this country to pay for everything you get," Tresler answered, a little shortly.

He was being laughed at more than he cared about. Still he checked his annoyance. He wanted to know something about the local reputation of the rancher he had apprenticed himself to, so he fired a direct question in amongst his audience.

"Look here," he said sharply. "What's the game? What's the matter with this Julian Marbolt?"

He looked round for an answer, which, for some minutes, did not seem to be forthcoming.

Slum broke the silence at last. "He's blind," he said quietly.

"I know that," retorted Tresler, impatiently. "It's something else I want to know."

He looked at the butcher, who only laughed. He turned on the saloon-keeper, who shook his head. Finally he applied to Shaky.

"Wal," the carpenter began, with a ponderous air of weighing his words. "I ain't the man to judge a feller off-hand like. I 'lows I know suthin' o' the blind man o' Skitter Bend, seein' I was workin' contract fer him all last summer. An' wot I knows is—nasty. I've see'd things on that ranch as made me git a tight grip on my axe, an' long a'mighty hard to bust a few heads in. I've see'd that all-fired Jake Harnach, the foreman, hammer hell out o' some o' the hands, wi' tha'

blind man standin' by jest as though his gummy eyes could see what was doin', and I've watched his ugly face workin' wi' every blow as Jake pounded, 'cos o' the pleasure it give him. I've see'd some o' those fellers wilter right down an' grovel like yaller dorgs at their master's feet. I've see'd that butcher-lovin' lot handle their hosses an' steers like so much dead meat—an' wuss'n. I've see'd hell around that ranch. 'An' why for,' you asks, 'do their punchers an' hands stand it?' 'Cos,' I answers quick, 'ther' ain't a job on this countryside goin' fer 'em after Julian Marbolt's done with 'em.' That's why. 'Wher' was you workin' around before?" asks a foreman. 'Skitter Bend,' says the puncher. 'Ain't got nothin' fer you,' says the foreman quick; 'guess this ain't no butcherin' bizness!' An' that's jest how it is right thro' with Skitter Bend," Shaky finished up, drenching the spittoon against the bar with consummate accuracy.

"Right—dead right," said Twirly, with a laugh.

"Guess, mebbe, you're prejudiced some," suggested Carney, with an eye on his visitor.

"Shaky's taken to book readin'," said Slum, gently. "Guess dime fictions gits a powerful holt on some folk."

"Dime fictions y'rself," retorted Shaky, sullenly. "Mebbe young Dave Steele as come back from ther' with a hole in his head that left him plumb crazy ever since till he died, 'cos o' some racket he had wi' Jake—mebbe that's out of a dime fiction. Say, you git right to it, an' kep on runnin' whisky, Slum Ranks. You ken do that—you can't tell me 'bout the blind man."

A pause in the conversation followed while Ike dried some glasses. The room was getting dark. It was a cheerless den. Tresler was thoughtfully smoking. He was digesting and sifting what he had heard; trying to separate fact from fiction in Shaky's story. He felt that there must be exaggeration. At last he broke the silence, and all eyes were turned on him.

"And do you mean to say there is no law to protect

people on these outlying stations? Do you mean to tell me that men sit down quietly under such dastardly tyranny?" His questions were more particularly directed towards Shaky.

"Law?" replied the carpenter. "Law? Say, we don't rec'nize no law around these parts—not yet. Mebbe it's comin', but—I 'lows there's jest one law at present, an' that we mostly carry's on us. Oh, Jake Harnach's met his match 'fore now. But 'tain't frekent. Yes, Jake's a big swine, wi' the muscle o' two men; but I've seen him git downed, and not a hund'ed mile from wher' we're settin'. Say, Ike," he turned to the man behind the bar, "you ain't like to fergit the night Black Anton called his 'hand.' Ther' ain't no bluff to Anton. When he gits to the bizness end of a gun it's best to get your thumbs up sudden."

The saloon-keeper nodded. "Guess there's one man who's got Jake's measure, an' that's Black Anton."

The butcher added a punctuating laugh, while Slum nodded.

"And who's Black Anton?" asked Tresler of the saloon-keeper.

"Anton? Wal, I guess he's Marbolt's private hoss keeper. He's a half-breed. French-Canadian; an' tough. Say, he's jest as quiet an' easy you wouldn't know he was around. Soft spoken as a woman, an' jest about as vicious as a rattler. Guess you'll meet him. An' I 'lows he's meetable—till he's riled."

"Pleasant sort of man if he can cow this wonderful Jake," observed Tresler, quietly.

"Oh yes, pleasant 'nough," said Ike, mistaking his guest's meaning.

"The only thing I can't understand 'bout Anton," said Slum, suddenly becoming interested, "is that he's earnin' his livin' honest. He's too quiet, an'—an' iley. He sort o' slid into this territory wi'out a blamed cit'zen of us knowin'. We've heerd tell of him sence from 'crost the border, an' the

yarns ain't nice. I don't figger to argue wi' strangers at no time, an' when Anton's around I don't never git givin' no opinion till he's done talkin', when I mostly find mine's the same as his."

"Some folks ain't got no grit," growled Shaky, contemptuously.

"An' some folk a' got so much grit they ain't got no room fer savee," rapped in Slum sharply.

"Meanin' me," said Shaky, sitting up angrily.

"I 'lows you've got grit," replied the little man quietly, looking squarely into the big man's eyes.

"Go to h——"

"Guess I'd as lief be in Forks; it's warmer," replied Slum, imperturbably.

"Stow yer gas! You nag like a widder as can't git a second man."

"Which wouldn't happen wi' folk o' your kidney around."

Shaky was on his feet in an instant, and his anger was blazing in his fierce eyes.

"Say, you gorn——"

"Set right ther', Shaky," broke in Slum, as the big man sprang towards him. "Set right ther'; ther' ain't goin' to be no hoss-play."

Slum Ranks had not shifted his position, but his right hand had dived into his jacket pocket and his eyes flashed ominously. And the carpenter dropped back into his seat without a word.

And Tresler looked on in amazement. It was all so quick, so sudden. There had hardly been a breathing space between the passing of their good nature and their swift-rising anger. The strangeness of it all, the lawlessness, fascinated him. He knew he was on the fringe of civilization, but he had had no idea of how sparse and short that fringe was. He thought that civilization depended on the presence of white folk. That, of necessity, white folk must themselves have the instincts of civilization.

Here he saw men, apparently good comrades all, who were ready, on the smallest provocation, to turn and rend each other. It was certainly a new life to him, something that perhaps he had vaguely dreamt of, but the possibility of the existence of which he had never seriously considered.

But, curiously enough, as he beheld these things for himself for the first time, they produced no shock, they disturbed him in nowise. It all seemed so natural. More, it roused in him a feeling that such things should be. Possibly this feeling was due to his own upbringing, which had been that of an essentially athletic public school. One that was renowned rather for its cricket, football, rowing, boxing, and other kindred sports, than for the scholarly aims of its curriculum. He even felt the warm blood surge through his veins at the prospect of a forcible termination to the two men's swift passage of arms.

But the ebullition died out as quickly as it had risen. Slum slid from the bar to the ground, and his deep-set eyes were smiling again.

"Pshaw," he said, with a careless shrug, "ther' ain't nothin' to grit wi'out savee."

Shaky rose and stretched himself as though nothing had happened to disturb the harmony of the meeting. The butcher relinquished his hold on the bar and moved across to the window.

"Guess the missis 'll be shoutin' around fer you fellers to git your suppers," Slum observed cheerfully. Then he turned to Tresler. "Ike, here, don't run no boarders. Mebbe you'd best git around to my shack. Sally'll fix you up with a blanket or two, an' the grub ain't bad. You see, I run a boardin'-house fer the boys—leastways, Sally does."

And Tresler adopted the suggestion. He had no choice but to do so. Anyway, he was quite satisfied with the arrangement. He had entered the life of the prairie and was more than willing to adopt its ways and its people.

And the recollection of that first night in Forks remained

with him when the memory of many subsequent nights had passed from him. It stuck to him as only the first strong impressions of a new life can.

He met Sally Ranks—she was two sizes too large for the dining-room of the boarding-house—who talked in a shrieking nasal manner that cut the air like a knife, and who heaped the plates with coarse food that it was well to have a good appetite to face. He dined for the first time in his life at a table that had no cloth, and devoured his food with the aid of a knife and fork that had never seen a burnish since they had first entered the establishment, and drank boiled tea out of a tin cup that had once been enamelled. He was no longer John Tresler, freshly arrived from England, but one of fourteen boarders, the majority of whom doubled the necessary length of their sentences when they conversed by reason of an extensive vocabulary of blasphemy, and picked their teeth with their forks.

But it was pleasant to him. He was surrounded by something approaching the natural man. Maybe they were drawn from the dregs of society, but nevertheless they had forcibly established their right to live—a feature that had lifted them from the ruck of thousands of law-abiding citizens. He experienced a friendly feeling for these ruffians. More, he had a certain respect for them.

After supper many of them drifted back to their recreation-ground, the saloon. Tresler, although he had no inclination for drink, would have done the same. He wished to see more of the people, to study them as a man who wishes to prepare himself for a new part. But the quiet Slum drew him back and talked gently to him; and he listened.

"Say, Tresler," the little man remarked off-handedly, "ther's three fellers lookin' fer a gamble. Two of 'em ain't a deal at 'draw,' the other's pretty neat. I tho't, mebbe, you'd notion a hand up here wi' us. It's better'n loafin' down the saloon. We most gener'ly play a dollar limit."

And so it was arranged. Tresler stayed. He was initiated.

He learned the result of a game of "draw" in Forks, where the players make the whole game of life a gamble, and attain a marked proficiency in the art. The result was inevitable. By midnight there were four richer citizens in Forks, and a new-comer who was poorer by his change out of a hundred-dollar bill. But Tresler lost quite cheerfully. He never really knew how it was he lost, whether it was his bad play or bad luck. He was too tired and sleepy long before the game ended. He realized next morning, when he came to reflect, that in some mysterious manner he had been done. However, he took his initiation philosophically, making only a mental reservation for future guidance.

That night he slept on a palliasse of straw, with a pillow consisting of a thin bolster propped on his outer clothes. Three very yellow blankets made up the tally of comfort. And the whole was spread out on the floor of a room in which four other men were sleeping noisily.

After breakfast he paid his bill, and, procuring his horse, prepared for departure. His first acquaintance in Forks stood his friend to the last. Slum it was who looked round his horse to see that the girths of the saddle were all right; Slum it was who praised the beast in quiet, critical tones; Slum it was who shook him by the hand and wished him luck; Slum it was who gave him a parting word of advice; just as it was Slum who had first met him with ridicule, cared for him—at a price—during his sojourn, and quietly robbed him at a game he knew little about. And Tresler, with the philosophy of a man who has that within him which must make for achievement, smiled, shook hands heartily and with good will, and quietly stored up the wisdom he had acquired in his first night in Forks Settlement.

"Say, Tresler," exclaimed Slum, kindly, as he wrung his departing guest's hand, "I'm real glad I've met you. I 'lows, comin' as you did, you might a' run dead into some durned skunk as hadn't the manners fer dealin' with a hog. There's a hatful of 'em in Forks. S'long. Say, ther's a gal at Skitter

Bend. She's the ol' blind hoss's daughter, an' she's a daddy. But don't git sparkin' her wi' the ol' man around."

Tresler laughed. Slum amused him.

"Good-bye," he said. "Your kindness has taken a load—off my mind. I know more than I did yesterday morning. No, I won't get sparking the girl with the old man around. See you again sometime."

And he passed out of Forks.

"That feller's a decent—no, he's a gentleman," muttered Slum, staring after the receding horseman. "Guess Skitter Bend's jest about the place fer him. He'll bob out on top like a cork in a water bar'l. Say, Jake Harnach 'll git his feathers trimmed or I don't know a 'deuce-spot' from a 'straight flush.'"

Which sentiments spoke volumes for his opinion of the man who had just left him.

CHAPTER II

MOSQUITO BEND

FORKS died away in a shimmering haze of heat as Tresler rode out over the hard prairie trail. Ten miles they had told him it was to Mosquito Bend; a ten-mile continuation of the undulating plains he had now grown accustomed to. He allowed his horse to take it leisurely. There was no great hurry for an early arrival.

John Tresler had done what many an enterprising youngster from Europe has done since. At the age of twenty-five, finding himself possessed of a decent amount of capital, with no profession or calling at his back, and having been brought up in the obscure but limited agricultural districts of Cornwall, he had decided to break new ground for himself on the prairie-lands of Canada. Stock raising was his object, and, to this end, he had sought out a ranch where he could thoroughly master the craft before embarking on his own enterprise.

It was through official channels that he had heard of Mosquito Bend as one of the largest ranches in the country at the time, and he had at once entered into negotiations with the owner, Julian Marbolt, for a period of instruction. His present journey was the result.

He thought a good deal as his horse ambled over that ten miles. He weighed the stories he had heard from Shaky, and picked them threadbare. He reduced his efforts to a few pointed conclusions. Things were decidedly rough at Mosquito Bend. Probably the brutality was the case of brute

force pitted against brute force—he had taken into consideration the well-known disposition of the Western cowpuncher—and, as such, a matter of regrettable necessity for the governing of the place. That Shaky had in some way fallen foul of the master and foreman and had allowed personal feelings to warp his judgment. And, lastly, that, taking his “greenness” into account, he had piled up the agony simply from the native love of the “old hand” for scaring a new-comer.

Tresler was no weakling or he would never have set out to shape his own course as he was now doing. He was a man of considerable purpose, self-reliant and reasonable, with just sufficient easy good-nature compatible with strength. He liked his own experiences too, though he never scorned the experiences of another. Slum had sized him up pretty shrewdly when he said, “he’ll bob out on top like a cork in a water bar’l,” but he had not altogether done him full justice.

The south-western trail headed slantwise for the mountains, which snowy barrier bounded his vision to the west the whole of his journey. He had watched the distant white-capped ramparts until their novelty had worn off, and now he took their presence as a matter of course. His eyes came back to the wide, almost limitless plains about him, and he longed for the sight of a tree, a river, even a cultivated patch of nodding wheat. But there was just nothing but the lank, tawny grass for miles and miles, and the blazing sunlight that scorched him and baked grey streaks of dusty sweat on his horse’s shoulders and flanks.

He rode along dreaming, as no doubt hundreds of others have dreamt before and since. There was nothing new or original about his dreams, for he was not a man given to romance. He was too direct and practical for that. No, his were just the thoughts of a young man who has left his home, which thereby gains in beauty as distance lends enchantment to it, and kindly recollection crowns it with a glory that it could never in reality possess.

Without indication or warning he came upon one of those

strangely hidden valleys in which the prairie near the Rockies abounds. He found himself at the edge of it, gazing down upon a wide woodland bound river, which wound away to the east and west like the trail of some prehistoric monster. The murmur of the flowing waters came to him with such a suggestion of coolness and shade, that, for the first time on his long journey from Calford, he was made to forget the park-like beauties of his own native land.

There was a delightful variation of colour in the foliage down there. Such a density of shadow, such a brilliancy. And a refreshing breeze was rustling over the tree-tops, a breath he had longed for on the plains but had never felt. The opposite side was lower. He stood on a sort of giant step. A wall that divided the country beyond from the country he was leaving. A wall that seemed to isolate those who might live down there and shut them out as though theirs was another world.

He touched his horse's flanks, and, with careful, stilted steps, the animal began the descent. And now he speculated as to the whereabouts of the ranch, for he knew that this was the Mosquito River, and somewhere upon its banks stood his future home. As he thought of this he laughed. His future home; well, judging by what he had been told, it would certainly possess the charm of novelty.

He was forced to give up further speculation for awhile. The trail descended so sharply that his horse had to sidle down it, and the loose shingle under his feet set him sliding and slipping dangerously.

In a quarter of an hour he drew up on the river bank and looked about him. Whither? That was the question. He was at four cross-roads. East and west, along the river bank; and north and south, the way he had come and across the water.

Along the bank the woods were thick and dark, and the trail split them like the aisle of an aged Gothic church. The surface of red sand was hard, but there were marks of traffic

upon it. Then he looked across the river at the distant rolling plains.

"Of course," he said aloud. "Who's going to build a ranch on this side? Where would the cattle run?"

And he put his horse at the water and waded across without further hesitation. Beyond the river the road bent away sharply to the right, and cut through a wide avenue of enormous pine trees, and along this he hustled his horse. Half a mile further on the avenue widened. The solemn depths about him lightened, and patches of sunlight shone down into them and lit up the matted underlay of rotting cones and bark which covered the earth.

The road bent sharply away from the river, revealing a scrub of low bush decorated with a collection of white garments, evidently set out to dry. His horse shied at the unusual sight, and furthermore took exception to the raucous sound of a man's voice chanting a dismal melody, somewhere away down by the river on his right.

In this direction he observed a cattle-path. And the sight of it suggested ascertaining the identity of the doleful minstrel. No doubt this man could give him the information he needed. He turned off the road and plunged into scrub. And at the river bank he came upon a curious scene. There was a sandy break in the bush, and the bank sloped gradually to the water's edge. Three or four washing-tubs, grouped together in a semicircle, stood on wooden trestles, and a quaint-looking little man was bending over one of them washing clothes, rubbing and beating a handful of garments on a board like any washerwoman. His back was turned to the path, and he faced the river. On his right stood an iron furnace and boiler, with steam escaping from under the lid. And all around him the bushes were hung with drying clothes.

"Hello!" cried Tresler, as he slipped to the ground.

"Holy smoke!"

The scrubbing and banging had ceased, and the most curiously twisted face Tresler had ever seen glanced back

over the man's bowed shoulder. A red, perspiring face, tufted at the point of the chin with a knot of grey whisker, a pair of keen grey eyes, and a mouth—yes, it was the mouth that held Tresler's attention. It went up on one side, and had somehow got mixed up with his cheek, while a suggestion of it was continued by means of a dark red scar right up to the left eye.

For a second or two Tresler couldn't speak, he was so astonished, so inclined to laugh. And all the while the grey eyes took him in from head to foot; then another exclamation, even more awestruck, broke from the stranger.

"Gee-whizz!"

And Tresler sobered at once.

"Where's Mosquito Bend Ranch?" he asked.

The little man dropped his washing and turned round, propping himself against the edge of the tub.

"Skitter Bend Ranch?" he echoed slowly, as though the meaning of the question had not penetrated to his intellect. Then a subdued whisper followed. "Gee, but I——" And he looked down at his own clothes as though to reassure himself.

Tresler broke in; he understood the trend of the other's thoughts.

"Yes, Mosquito Bend," he said sharply.

"Nigh to a mile on. Keep to the trail, an' you'll strike Blind Hell in a few minutes. Say——" He broke off, and looked up into Tresler's face.

"Yes, I'm going there. You don't happen to belong to— to Blind Hell?"

"Happen I do," assured the washerman. "I do the chores around the ranch. Joe Nelson, once a stock raiser m'self. Kerrville, Texas. Now——" He broke off, and waved a hand in the direction of the drying clothes.

"Well, I'm John Tresler, and I'm on my way to Mosquito Bend."

"So you're the 'tenderfoot,'" observed the choreman,

musingly. "You're the feller from England as Jake's goin' to lick into shape."

"Going to teach, you mean."

"I s'pose I do," murmured the other gently, but without conviction. The twisted side of his face wrinkled hideously, while the other side smiled.

"You mentioned Blind Hell just now?" questioned Tresler, as the other relapsed into a quiet survey of him.

"Blind Hell, did I?" said Nelson, repeating the name, a manner which seemed to be a sort of habit of his.

"Yes. What is it? What did you mean?"

Tresler's questions were a little peremptory. He felt that the riding-breeches that had caused such notice in Forks were likely to bring him further ridicule.

"Oh, it's jest a name. 'Tain't of no consequence. Say," he broke out suddenly, "you don't figger to git humpin' steers in that rig?" He stretched out an abnormally long arm, and pointed a rough but wonderfully clean finger at the flowing corduroys Tresler had now become so sensitive about.

"Great Scott, man!" he let out testily. "Have you never seen riding-breeches before?—you; a ranchman."

The tufted beard shot sideways again as the face screwed up and half of it smiled.

"I do allow I've seen such things before. Oncet," he drawled slowly, with a slight Southern accent, but in a manner that betokened a speech acquired by association rather than the natural tongue. "He was a feller that came out to shoot big game up in the hills. I ain't seen him sence, sure. Guess nobody did." He looked away sadly. "We heerd tell of him. Guess he got fossicking after b'ar. The wind was blowin' ter'ble. He'd climbed a mount'n. It was pretty high. Ther' wa'an't no shelter. A gust o' that wind come an'—took him."

Nelson had turned back to his tubs, and was again banging and rubbing.

"A mile down the trail, I think you said?" Tresler cried, springing hastily into the saddle.

"Sure."

And for the first time the Englishman's horse felt the sharp prick of the spurs as he rode off.

Mosquito Bend Ranch stood in a wide clearing, with the house on a rising ground above it. It was lined at the back by a thick pinewood. For the rest the house faced out on to the prairie, and the verandahed front overlooked the barns, corrals, and outhouses. It stood apart, fully one hundred yards from the nearest outbuildings.

This was the first impression Tresler obtained on arrival. The second was that it was a magnificent ranch and the proprietor must be a wealthy man. The third was one of disappointment; everything was so quiet, so still. There was no rush or bustle. No horsemen riding around with cracking whips; no shouting, no atmosphere of wildness. And, worst of all, there were no droves of cattle tearing around. Just a few old milch cows near by, peacefully grazing their day away, and philosophically awaiting milking time. These, and a few dogs, a horse or two loose in the corrals, and a group of men idling outside a low, thatched building, comprised the life he first beheld as he rode into the clearing.

"And this is Blind Hell," he said to himself as he came. "It belies its name. A more peaceful, beautiful picture I've never clapped eyes on."

And then his thoughts went back to Forks. That too had looked so innocent. After all, he remembered, it was the people who made or marred a place.

So he rode straight to a small, empty corral, and, off-saddling, turned his horse loose, and deposited his saddle and bridle in the shadow of the walls. Then he moved up towards the buildings where the men were grouped.

They eyed him steadily as he came, much as they might eye a strange animal, and he felt a little uncomfortable as he recollected his encounter first with Slum and more recently with Joe Nelson. He had grown sensitive about his appearance, and a spirit of defiance and retaliation awoke within him

But for some reason the men paid little attention to him just then. One man was talking, and the rest were listening with rapt interest. They were cowpunchers, every one. Cowpunchers such as Tresler had heard of. Some were still wearing their fringed "chapps," their waists belted with gun and ammunition; some were in plain overalls and thin cotton shirts. All, except one, were tanned a dark, ruddy hue, unshaven, unkempt, but tough-looking and hardy. The pale-faced exception was a thin, sick-looking fellow with deep hollows under his eyes, and lips as ashen as a corpse. He it was who was talking, and his recital demanded a great display of dramatic gesture.

Tresler came up and joined the group. "I never ast to git put up ther'," he heard the sick man saying; "never ast, an' didn't want. It was her doin's, an' I tell you fellers right here she's jest thet serrupy an' good as don't matter. I'd a' rotted down here wi' flies an' the heat fer all they'd a' cared. That blind son of a —— 'ud a' jest laffed ef I'd handed over, an' Jake—say, we'll level our score one day, sure. Next time Red Mask, or any other hoss-thief, gits around, I'll bear a hand drivin' off the bunch. I ain't scrappin' no more fer the blind man. Look at me. Guess I ain't no more use'n yon 'tenderfoot.'" The speaker pointed scornfully at Tresler, and his audience turned and looked. "Guess I've lost quarts o' blood, an' have got a hole in my chest ye couldn't plug with a corn-sack. An' now, jest when I'm gittin' to mend decent, he comes an' boosts me right out to the bunk-house 'cause he ketches me yarnin' wi' that bit of a gal o' his. But, say, she jest let out on him that neat as you fellers never heerd. Yes, sir, guess her tongue's like velvet mostly, but when she turned on that blind hulk of a father of hers—wal, ther', ef I was a cat an' had nine lives to give fer her they jest wouldn't be enough by a hund'ed."

"Say, Arizona," said one of the men quietly, "what was you yarnin' 'bout? Guess you allus was sweet on Miss Dianny."

Arizona turned on the speaker fiercely. "That'll do fer you, Raw ; mebbe you ain't got savee, an' don't know a lady when you sees one. I'm a cow-hand, an' good as any man around here, an' ef you've any doubts about it, why——"

"Don't take no notice, Arizona," put in a lank youth quickly. He was a tall, hungry-looking boy, in that condition of physical development when nature seems in some doubt as to her original purpose. "'E's on'y laffin' at you."

"Guess Mister Raw Harris ken quit right here then, Teddy. I ain't takin' his slack noways."

"Git on with the yarn, Arizona," cried another. "Say, wot was you sayin' to the gal?"

"Y' see, Jacob," the sick man went on, falling back into his drawling manner, "it wus this ways. Miss Dianny, she likes a feller to git yarnin', an', seein' as I've been punchin' most all through the States, she kind o' notioned my yarns. Which I 'lows is reasonable. She'd fixed my chest up, an' got me trussed neat an' all, an' set right down aside me fer a gas. You know her ways, kind o' sad an' saft. Wal, she up an' tells me how she'd like gittin' in to Calford next winter, an' talked o' dances an' sech. Say, she wus jest whoopin' wi' the pleasure o' the tho't of it. Guess likely she'd be mighty pleased to git aways. Wal, I don't jest know how it come, but I got yarnin' of a barbecue as was held down Arizona way. I was tellin' as how I wus ther', an' got winged nasty. It wa'an't much. Y' see I was tellin' her as I wus runnin' a bit of a hog ranch them times, an', on o-casions, we used to give parties. The pertickler party I wus referrin' to wus a pretty wholesome racket. The boys got good an' drunk, an' they got slingin' the lead frekent 'fore daylight come around. Howsum, it wus the cause o' the trouble as I wus gassin' 'bout. Y' see, Brown was one of them juicy fellers that chawed hunks o' plug till you could nose Virginny ev'ry time you got wi'in gunshot of him. He was a cantankerous cuss was Brown, an' a deal too free wi' his tongue. Y' see he'd a lady with him ; leastways she wus the pot-wolloper from the

saloon he favoured, an' he guessed as she wus most as han'-some as a bible 'lustration. Wal, 'bout the time the rotgut wus flowin' good an' frekent, they started in to pool fer the prettiest wench in the room, as is the custom down ther'. Brown, he wus dead set on his gal winnin', I guess; an' 'Dyke Hole' Bill, he'd got a pretty tidy filly wi' him hisself, an' didn't reckon as no daisy from a bum saloon could gi' her any sort o' start. Wal, to cut it short, I guess the boys went dead out fer Bill's gal. It wus voted as ther' wa'an't no gal around Spawn City as could dec'rate the country wi' sech beauty. I guess things went kind o' silent when Shaggy Steele read the ballot. The air o' that place got uneasy. I located the door in one gulp. Y' see Brown wus allus kind o' sudden. But the trouble come diff'rent. The thing jest dropped, an' that party hummed fer awhile. Brown's gal up an' let go. Sez she, 'Here, guess I'm the dandy o' this run, an' I ain't settin' around while no old hen from Dyke Hole gits scoopin' prizes. She's goin' to lick me till I can't see, ef she's yearnin' fer that pool. Mebbe you boys won't need more'n half an eye to locate the winner when I'm done.' Wi' that she peels her waist off'n her, an' I do allow she wus a fine chunk. An' the 'Dyke Hole' daisy, she wa'an't no slouch; guess she wus jest bustin' wi' fight. But Brown sticks his taller-fat nose in an' shoots his bazzoo an'——

"An' that's most as fer as I gotten when along comes that all-fired 'dead eyes' an' points warnin' at me while he ogled me with them gummy red rims o' his. An', sez he, 'you light right out o' here sharp, Arizona; ther's place fer your scum down in the bunkhouse. An' I'm not goin' to have any skulkin' up here, telling disreputable yarns to my gal.' I wus jest beginnin' to argyfy. 'But,' sez I. An' he cut me short wi' a curse. 'Out of here!' he roared. 'I give you ten minutes to git!' Then she, Miss Dianny, bless her, she turned on him quick, an' dressed him down handsome. Sez she, 'Father, how can you be so unkind after what Arizona has done for you? Remember,' sez she, 'he saved

you a hundred head of cattle, and fought Red Mask's gang until help came and he fell from his horse.' Oh, she was a daddy, and heaped it on like bankin' a furnace. She cried lots an' lots, but it didn't signify. Out I wus to git, an' out I got. An' now I'll gamble that swine Jake 'll try and set me to work. But I'll level him—sure."

One of the men, Lew Cawley, laughed silently, and then put in a remark. Lew was a large specimen of the fraternity, and history said that he was the son of an English cleric. But history says similar things of many ne'er-do-wells in the North-west. He still used the accent of his forebears.

"Old blind-hunks knows something. With all respect, Arizona has winning ways; but," he added, before the fiery southerner could retort, "if I mistake not, here comes Jake to fulfil Arizona's prophecy."

Every one swung round as Lew nodded in the direction of the house. A huge man of about six feet five was striding rapidly down the slope. Tresler, who had been listening to the story on the outskirts of the group, eyed the new-comer with wonder. He came at a gait in which every movement displayed a vast, monumental strength. He had never seen such physique in his life. The foreman was still some distance off, and he could not see his face, only a great spread of black beard and whisker. So this was the much cursed Jake Harnach, and, he thought without any particular pleasure, his future boss.

There was no further talk. Jake Harnach looked up and halted. Then he signalled, and a great shout came to the waiting group.

"Hi! hi! you there! You with the pants!"

A snigger went round the gathering, and Tresler knew that it was he who was being summoned. He turned away to hide his annoyance, but was given no chance of escape.

"Say, send that guy with the pants along!" roared the foreman. And Tresler was forced into unwilling compliance.

And thus the two men, chiefly responsible for the telling

of this story of Mosquito Bend, met. The spirit of the meeting was antagonistic; a spirit which, in the days to come, was to develop into a merciless hatred. Nor was the reason far to seek, nor could it have been otherwise. Jake looked out upon the world through eyes that distorted everything to suit his own brutal nature, while Tresler's simple manliness was the result of his youthful training as a public schoolboy.

The latter saw before him a man of perhaps thirty-five, a man of gigantic stature, with a face handsome in its form of features, but disfigured by the harsh depression of the black brows over a pair of hard, bold eyes. The lower half of his face was buried beneath a beard so dense and black as to utterly disguise the mould of his mouth and chin, thus leaving only the harsh tones of his voice as a clue to what lay hidden there.

His dress was unremarkable but typical—moleskin trousers, a thin cotton shirt, a grey tweed jacket, and a silk handkerchief about his neck. He carried nothing in the shape of weapons, not even the usual leather belt and sheath-knife. And in this he was apart from the method of his country, where the use of firearms was the practice in disputes.

On his part, Jake looked upon a well-built man five inches his inferior in stature, but a man of good proportions, with a pair of shoulders that suggested possibilities. But it was the steady look in the steel-blue eyes which told him most. There was a simple directness in them which told of a man unaccustomed to any brow-beating; and, as he gazed into them, he made a mental note that this newcomer must be reduced to a proper humility at the earliest opportunity.

There was no pretence of courtesy between them. Neither offered to shake hands. Jake blurted out his greeting in a vicious tone.

"Say, didn't you hear me callin'?" he asked sharply.

"I did." And the Cornishman looked quietly into the

eyes before him, but without the least touch of bravado or of yielding.

"Then why in h—— didn't you come?"

"I was not to know you were calling me."

"Not to know?" retorted the other roughly. "I guess there aren't two guys with pants like yours around the ranch. Now, see right here, young feller, you'll just get a grip on the fact that I'm foreman of this lay-out, and, as far as the 'hands' are concerned, I'm boss. When I call, you come—and quick."

The man towered over Tresler in a bristling attitude. His hands were aggressively thrust into his jacket pockets, and he emphasized his final words with a scowl. And it was his attitude that roused Tresler; the words were the words of an overweening bully, and might have been laughed at, but the attitude said more, and no man likes to be brow-beaten. His anger leapt, and, though he held himself tightly, it found expression in the biting emphasis of his reply.

"When I'm one of the 'hands,' yes," he said incisively.

Jake stared. Then a curious sort of smile flitted across his features.

"Hah!" he ejaculated.

And Tresler went on with cold indifference. "And, in the meantime, I may as well say that the primary object of my visit is to see Mr. Marbolt, not his foreman. That, I believe," he added, pointing to the building on the hill, "is his house."

Without waiting for a reply he stepped aside, and would have moved on. But Jake had swung round, and his hand fell heavily upon his shoulder.

"No you don't, my dandy cock!" he cried violently, his fingers painfully gripping the muscle under the Norfolk jacket.

Springing aside, and with one lithe twist, in a flash Tresler had released himself, and stood confronting the giant with blazing eyes and tense drawn muscles.

"Lay a hand on me again, and there'll be trouble," he said sharply, and there was an odd Cornish burr in his speech.

The foreman stood for a moment as words failed him. Then his fury broke loose.

"I told you jest now," he cried, falling back into the twang of the country as his rage mastered him, "that I run this lay-out——"

"And I tell you," broke in the equally angry Tresler, "that I've nothing to do with you or the ranch either until I have seen your master. And I'll have you know that if there's any bull-doing to be done, you can keep it until I am one of the 'hands.' You shan't lack opportunity."

The tone was as scathing as the violence of his anger would permit. He had not moved, except to thrust his right hand into his jacket pocket, while he measured the foreman with his eyes and watched his every movement.

He saw Harnach hunch himself as though to spring at him. He saw the great hands clench at his sides and his arms draw up convulsively. He saw the working face and the black eyes as they half closed and reduced themselves to mere slits beneath the overshadowing brows. Then the hoarse, rage-choked voice came.

"By G——! I'll smash you, you——"

"I shouldn't say it." Tresler's tone had suddenly changed to one of icy coldness. The flash of a white dress had caught his eye. "There's a lady present," he added abruptly. And at the same time he released his hold on the smooth butt of a heavy revolver he had been gripping in his pocket.

What might have happened but for the timely interruption it would be impossible to say. Jake's arms dropped to his sides, and his attitude relaxed with a suddenness that was almost ludicrous. The white dress fluttered towards him, and Tresler turned and raised his prairie hat. He gave the foreman no heed whatever. The man might never have been there. He took a step forward,

"Miss Marbolt, I believe," he said. "Forgive me, but it seems that, being a stranger, I must introduce myself. I am John Tresler. I have just been performing the same ceremony for your father's foreman's benefit. Can I see Mr. Marbolt?"

He was looking down into what he thought at the moment was the sweetest, saddest little face he had ever seen. It was dark with sunburn, in contrast with the prim white drill dress the girl wore, and her cheeks were tinged with a healthy colour which might have been a reflection of the rosy tint of the ribbon about her neck. But it was the quiet, dark brown eyes, half wistful and wholly sad, and the slight droop at the corners of the pretty mouth, that gave him his first striking impression. She was a delightful picture, but one of great melancholy, quite out of keeping with her youth and fresh beauty.

She looked up at him from under the brim of a wide straw sun-hat, trimmed with a plain silk handkerchief, and pinned to her wealth of curling brown hair so as to give her face the utmost shade. Then she frankly held out her hand in welcome to him, whilst her eyes questioned his, for she had witnessed the scene between the two men and overheard their words. But Tresler listened to her greeting with a disarming smile on his face.

"Welcome, Mr. Tresler," she said gravely. "We have been expecting you. But I'm afraid you can't see father just now. He's sleeping. He always sleeps in the afternoon. You see, daylight or night, it makes no difference to him. He's blind. He has drifted into a curious habit of sleeping in the day as well as at night. Possibly it is a blessing, and helps him to forget his affliction. I am always careful, in consequence, not to waken him. But come along up to the house ; you must have some lunch, and, later, a cup of tea."

"You are awfully kind."

Tresler watched a troubled look that crept into the calm

expression of her eyes. Then he looked on while she turned and dismissed the discomfited foreman.

"I shan't ride this afternoon, Jake," she said coldly. "You might have Bessie shod for me instead. Her hoofs are getting very long." Then she turned again to her guest. "Come, Mr. Tresler."

And the Cornishman readily complied.

Nor did he even glance again in the direction of the foreman.

Jake cursed, not audibly, but with such hateful intensity that even the mat of beard and moustache parted, and the cruel mouth and clenched teeth beneath were revealed. His eyes, too, shone with a diabolical light. For the moment Tresler was master of the situation, but, as Jake had said, he was "boss" of that ranch. "Boss" with him did not mean "owner."

CHAPTER III

THE BLIND MAN

TRESLER was unfeignedly glad to leave Jake Harnach behind him, but he looked very serious as he and his companion moved on to the house. The result of his meeting with the foreman would come back on him later, he knew, and it was as well that he was prepared. The meeting had been unfortunate, but, judging by what he had heard of Jake in Forks, he must inevitably have crossed the bully sooner or later ; Jake himself would have seen to that.

Diane Marbolt paused as she came to the verandah. They had not spoken since their greeting. Now she turned abruptly, and quietly surveyed her guest. Nor was there any rudeness in her look. Tresler felt that he was undergoing a silent cross-examination, and waited, quietly smiling down at her from his superior height.

At last she smiled up at him and nodded.

"Will I do?" he asked.

"I think so."

It was a curious position, and they both laughed. But in the girl's manner there was no levity.

"You are not sure? Is there anything wrong about me? My—my dress, for instance?" Tresler laughed again ; he had missed the true significance of his companion's attitude towards him.

Just for a moment the dark little face took on a look of perplexity. Then the pucker of the brows smoothed out, and she smiled demurely as she answered.

"Oh, I see—no," doubtfully. Then more decidedly, "No. You see, you are a 'tenderfoot.' You'll get over it later on."

And the last barrier of formality was set aside.

"Good," exclaimed Tresler, emphatically. "We are going to be friends, Miss Marbolt. I knew it. It was only that I feared that 'they' might ruin my chances of your approbation. You see, they've already caused me—er—trouble."

"Yes, I think we shall be friends," Diane answered quietly. "In the meantime, come along into the house and have your lunch. It is ready. I saw you coming along, and prepared it at once. You will not mind if I sit and look on while you eat. I have had mine. I want to talk to you before you see my father."

There was distinct anxiety in her manner. More surely than all, her eyes betrayed her uneasiness. However, he gave no sign, contenting himself with a cordial reply.

"You are very kind. I too should like a chat. You see, I am a 'tenderfoot,' and you have been kind enough to pass over my shortcomings."

Diane led the way into the house. And Tresler, following her, was struck with the simple comfort of this home in the wilds. It was a roomy two-storied house, unpretentious, but very capacious. They entered through one of three French windows what was evidently a useful sort of drawing-room-parlour. Beyond this they crossed a hallway, the entrance door of which stood open, and passed into a dining-room, which, in its turn, opened directly into a kitchen beyond. This room looked out on the woods at the back. Diane explained that her father's sanctum was in front of this, while behind the parlour was his bedroom, opposite the dining-room and kitchen. The rooms upstairs were bedrooms, and her own private parlour.

"You see, we keep no female servants, Mr. Tresler," the girl said, as she brought a pot of steaming coffee from the kitchen and set it on the table. "I am housekeeper. Joe

Nelson, the choreman, is my helper and does all the heavy work. He's quite a character."

"Yes, I know. I've met him," observed Tresler, dryly.

"Ah! Try that ham. I don't know about the cold pie, it may be tough. Yes, old Joe is an Englishman; at least, he was, but he's quite Americanised now. He spent forty years in Texas. He's really an educated man. Owned a nice ranch and got burned out. I'm very fond of him; but it isn't of Joe I want to talk."

"No."

The man helped himself to the veal and ham pie, and found it anything but tough.

Diane seated herself in a chair with her back to the uncurtained window, through which the early summer sun was staring.

"You have met Jake Harnach and made an enemy of him," she said suddenly, and with simple directness.

"Yes; the latter must have come anyway."

The girl sighed, and her eyes shone with a brooding light. And Tresler, glancing at her, recognized the sadness of expression he had noticed at their first meeting, and which, he was soon to learn, was habitual to her.

"I suppose so," she murmured in response. Then she roused herself, and spoke almost sharply. "What would you have done had he struck you? He is a man of colossal strength."

Tresler laughed easily. "That depends. I'm not quite sure. I should probably have done my best to retaliate. I had an alternative. I might have shot him."

"Oh!" the girl said with impulsive horror.

"Well, what would you have?" Tresler raised his eyebrows and turned his astonished eyes upon her. "Was I to stand lamb-like and accept a thrashing from that unconscionable ruffian? No, no," he shook his head. "I see it in your eyes. You condemn the method, but not the man. Remember, we all have a right to live—if we can. Maybe there's no absolute

necessity that we should, but still we are permitted to do our best. That's the philosophy I've had hammered into me with the various thrashings the school bullies at home have from time to time administered. I should certainly have done my best."

"And if you had done either of these things, I shudder to think what would have happened. It was unfortunate, terribly unfortunate. You do not know Jake Harnach. Oh, Mr. Tresler," the girl hurried on, leaning suddenly forward in her chair, and reaching out until her small brown hand rested on his arm, "please, please promise me that you won't run foul of Jake. He is terrible. You don't, you can't know him, or you would understand your danger."

"On the contrary, Miss Marbolt. It is because I know a great deal of him that I should be ready to retaliate very forcibly. I thank my stars I do know him. Had I not known of him before, your own words would have warned me to be ready for all emergencies. Jake must go his way and I'll go mine. I am here to learn ranching, not to submit to any bull-doing. But let us forget Jake for the moment, and talk of something more pleasant. What a charming situation the ranch has!"

The girl dropped back in her chair. There was no mistaking the decision of her visitor's words. She felt that no persuasion of hers could alter him. With an effort she contrived to answer him.

"Yes, it is a beautiful spot. You have not yet had time to appreciate the perfections of our surroundings." She paused for him to speak, but as he remained silent she laboured on with her thoughts set on other things. "The foothills come right down almost to our very doors. And then in the distance, above them, are the white caps of the mountains. We are sheltered, as no doubt you have seen, by the almost inaccessible wall beyond the river, and the pinewoods screen us from the north-east and north winds of winter. South and east are miles and miles of prairie-lands.

Father has been here for eighteen years. I was a child of four when we came. Calford was a mere settlement then, and Forks wasn't even in existence. We hadn't a neighbour nearer than Calford in those days, except the Indians and half-breeds. They were rough times, and father held his place only by the subtlety of his poor blind brain, and the arms of the men he had with him. Jake has been with us as long as I can remember. So you see," she added, returning to her womanly dread for his safety, "I know Jake. My warning is not the idle fear of a silly girl."

Tresler remained silent for a moment or two. Then he asked sharply—

"Why does your father keep him?"

The girl shrugged her shoulders. "Jake is the finest ranchman in the country."

And in the silence that followed Tresler helped himself to more coffee, and finished off with cheese and crackers. Neither seemed inclined to break up the awkwardness of the pause. For the time the man's thoughts were wandering in interested speculation as to the possibilities of his future on the ranch. He was not thinking so much of Jake, nor even of Julian Marbolt. It was of the gentler associations with the girl beside him—associations he had never anticipated in his wildest thoughts. She was no prairie-bred girl. Her speech, her manner, savoured too much of civilization. Yes, he decided in his mind, although she claimed Mosquito Bend as her home since she was four, she had been educated elsewhere. His thoughts were suddenly cut short. A faint sound caught his quick ears. Then Diane's voice, questioning him, recalled his wandering attention.

"I understand you intend to stay with us for three years?"

"Just as long as it will take to learn all the business of a ranch," he answered readily. "I am going to become one of the——"

Again he heard the peculiar noise, and he broke off

listening. Diane was listening too. It was a soft tap, tap, like some one knocking gently upon a curtained door. It was irregular, intermittent, like the tapping of a telegraph-sounder working very slowly.

"What's that?" he asked.

The girl had risen, and a puzzled look was in her eyes. "The noise? Oh, it's father," she said, with a shadowy smile, and in a lowered tone. "Something must have disturbed him. It is unusual for him to be awake so early."

Now they heard a door open, and the tapping ceased. Then the door closed and the lock turned. A moment later there came the jingle of keys, and then shuffling footsteps accompanied the renewed tapping.

Tresler was still listening. He had turned towards the door, and while his attention was fixed on the coming of the blind rancher, he was yet aware that Diane was clearing the table with what seemed to him unnecessary haste and noise. However, his momentary interest was centred upon the doorway and the passage outside, and he paid little heed to the girl's movements. The door stood open, and as he looked out the sound of shuffling feet drew nearer; then a figure passed the opening.

It was gone in a moment. But in that moment he caught sight of a tall man wrapped in the grey folds of a dressing-gown that reached to his feet. That, and the sharp outline of a massive head of close-cropped grey hair. The face was lost, all except the profile. He saw a long, high-bridged nose and a short, crisp beard and whisker. The tapping of the stick died slowly away. And he knew that the blind man had passed out on to the verandah.

Now he turned again to the girl, and would have spoken, but she raised a warning finger and shook her head. Then, moving towards the door, she beckoned to him to follow.

* * * * *

"Father, this is Mr. Tresler."

Tresler found himself looking down upon a remarkable

face. He acknowledged Diane's introduction, forgetful, for the moment, of the man's sightless eyes. He gripped the outstretched hand heartily, while he took in his first impressions of a strange personality.

They were out on the verandah. The rancher was sitting in a prim, uncushioned armchair. He had a strong, well-moulded, pale face, the sightless eyes of which held the attention. Tresler at once appreciated Shaky's description of them.

They were dreadful eyes. The pupils were there, and, in a measure, appeared natural except for their enormous size. They were black, jet black, and divided from what should have been the whites by minute rings of blue, the only suspicion of iris they possessed. But it was the whites that gave them their dreadful expression. They were scarlet with inflammation—an inflammation which extended to the rims of the lids and had eaten away the lashes. Of the rest of the face it was impossible for him to form much of an opinion. The iron-grey brows were depressed as though with physical pain, and so obliterated all natural expression. And the beard shut out the indications which the mouth and chin might have afforded.

"You're welcome, Mr. Tresler," he said, in a low, gentle tone. "I knew you were here some time ago."

Tresler was astonished at the quiet refinement of his voice. He had grown so accustomed to the high, raucous twang of the men of these wilds that it came as a surprise to him.

"I hope I didn't disturb you," he answered cheerily. "Miss Marbolt told me you were sleeping, and——"

"You didn't disturb me—at least, not in the way you mean. You see, I have developed a strange sensitiveness—a sort of second sight," he laughed a little bitterly. "I awoke by instinct the moment you approached the house, and heard you come in. The loss of one sense, you see, has made others more acute. Well, well, so you have come to learn ranching. Diane"—the blind man turned to his daughter—

"describe Mr. Tresler to me. What does he look like? Forgive me, my dear sir," he went on, turning with unerring instinct to the other. "I glean a perfect knowledge of those about me in this way."

"Certainly." The object of the blind man's interest smiled over at the girl.

Diane hesitated in some confusion.

"Go on, child," her father said, with a touch of impatience in his manner.

Thus urged she began. "Mr. Tresler is tall. Six feet. Broad-shouldered."

The man's red, staring eyes were bent on his pupil with a steady persistency.

"Yes, yes," he urged, as the girl paused.

"Dressed in English riding costume."

"His face?"

"Black hair, steel-blue eyes, black eyelashes and brows. Broad forehead——"

"Any lines?" questioned the blind man.

"Only two strong marks between the brows."

"Go on.

"Broad-bridged, rather large nose; well-shaped mouth, with inclination to droop at the corners; broad, split chin; well-covered cheeks and jaw."

"Ha! clean-shaven, of course—yes."

The rancher sat silent for some moments after Diane had finished her description. His lips moved, as though he were talking to himself; but no words came to those waiting. At last he stirred, and roused from his reverie.

"You come from Cornwall, Mr. Tresler, I understand?" he said pleasantly.

"Yes."

"A good country that breeds good men," he nodded, with an expression that was almost a smile. "I'm glad to be able to welcome you; I only wish I could see you. However," he went on kindly, "you will be able to learn ranching in all its

branches here. We breed horses and cattle. You'll find it rough. My foreman is not exactly gentle, but, believe me, he knows his business. He is the finest ranchman in the country, and I owe much of my success to him. You must get on the right side of Jake. It requires finding—the right side, I mean—but it is worth seeking."

Tresler smiled as he listened. He thoroughly agreed with the reference to the difficulty of finding Jake's "right" side. He endeavoured to catch Diane's eye, but she avoided his gaze. As the rancher paused, he broke in at once.

"I presume I start work in earnest to-morrow morning?"

The blind man shook his head. "No; better start in to-day. Our agreement reads to-day; it must not be broken. You take your position as one of the hands, and will be under the control of Jake Harnach."

"We can have tea first, though," put in Diane, who had followed her father's words with what seemed unnecessary closeness.

"Tut, tut, child," he replied impatiently. "Yes, we will have tea. 'Tis all you think of. See to it, and bring Tresler a chair; I must talk to him."

His words were a dismissal; and after Diane had provided a chair, she retired into the house, leaving apprentice and master alone. And the two men talked, as men will talk who have just come together from the ends of the world. Tresler avoided the details of his journey; nor did the blind man seem in any way interested in his personal affairs. It was the news of men, and matters concerning the old mother country, that they discussed. And the rancher's information and remarks, and keen, incisive questions, set the new-comer wondering. He watched the face before him, the red, sightless eyes. He studied the quiet, gentle-voiced man, as one may study an abstruse problem. The result was disheartening. One long, weary expression of pain was all he beheld; no lights and shades of emotion and interest. It was the face of one grown patient under a life-long course of suffering. Tresler

had listened to the bitter cursings against this man, but as the soft voice and cultured expressions fell upon his ears, the easy-flowing, pointed criticisms on matters of public interest, the broad philosophy, sometimes faintly dashed with bitterness and cynicism, but always sound, he found it hard to associate him with the significant sobriquet of the ranch. Tea-time found him still wrestling with the unsolved problem. But, with the advent of Diane with the table and laden tray, he set it aside for future study.

For the next half-hour he transferred his attention to the relations between father and daughter, as they chatted pleasantly of the ranching prospects of the country, for the benefit of their visitor. This was a lesser problem, and one he came near to achieving. Before he left them, he resolved that Diane stood in great awe, not to say fear, of her father. This to him was astonishing, judging by the strength of character every feature in her face displayed. It seemed to him that she was striving hard to bestow affection on him—trying to create an affection that had no place in her heart. Her efforts were painfully apparent. She convinced him at once of a lively sense of duty—a sense she was carrying to a point that was almost pitiful. All this he felt sure of, but it was the man who finally baffled him as he had baffled him before. How he regarded Diane it was impossible to say. Sometimes he could have sworn that the man's devotion to her was that of one who, helpless, clings to a support which never fails him; at others, he treated her to a sneering intolerance, which roused the young man's ire; and, again, he would change his tone, till the undercurrent of absolute hatred drowned the studied courtesy which veneered it. And when he finally rose to leave the verandah and seek out the foreman and report himself for duty, it was with a genuine feeling of relief at leaving the presence of those dreadful red eyes.

Diane was packing up the tea-things, and Tresler still lingered on the verandah; he was watching the blind man as he tapped his way into the house. Then, as he disappeared,

and the sound of his shuffling feet grew faint and distant, he became aware that Diane was standing holding the tray and watching him. He knew, too, by her attentive attitude, that she was listening to ascertain when her father should be out of earshot. As the sounds died away, and all became silent within the house, she came over to him. She spoke without pausing on her way; it seemed that she feared observation.

"Don't forget, Mr. Tresler, what I told you about Jake. Be warned. In spite of what you say, you do not know him."

"Thanks, Miss Marbolt," he replied warmly; "I shall not forget."

Diane was about to speak again, but the voice of her father, harsh and strident enough now, reached them from the hall-way.

"Come in, child, and let Tresler go to his work."

And Tresler noted the expression of fear that leapt into the girl's face as she hurriedly passed into the house. He stood for a moment wrathful and wondering; then he strode away towards the corrals, reflecting on the strange events which had so swiftly followed one upon the other.

"Ye gods," he muttered, "this is a queer place—and these are queer people."

Then as he saw the great figure of Jake coming up the hill towards him, from the direction of a small, isolated hut, he went out to meet him, unconsciously squaring himself as he drew near.

He expected an explosion; at least an angry demonstration. But nothing of the sort happened. The whole attitude of the man had changed to one of studied amiability. Not only that, but his diction was careful to a degree, as though he were endeavouring to impress this man from England with his superiority over the other ranchmen.

"Well? You have seen him?"

"Yes. I have now come to report myself ready for work," Tresler replied at once. He adopted a coldly business tone, deeming it best to observe this from the start.

To his surprise Jake became almost cordial. "Good. We can do with some hands, sure. Had a pleasant talk with the old man?" The question came indifferently, but a side-long glance accompanied it as the foreman turned away and gazed out over the distant prairie.

"I have," replied Tresler, shortly. "What are my orders, and where do I sleep?"

"Then you don't sleep up at the house?" Jake inquired, pretending surprise. There was a slight acidity in his tone.

"That is hardly to be expected when the foreman sleeps down there." Tresler nodded, indicating the outbuildings.

"That's so," observed the other, thoughtfully. "No, I guess the old man don't fancy folk o' your kidney around," he went on, relapsing into the speech of the bunkhouse unguardedly. "Mebbe it's different wi' the other."

Tresler could have struck him as he beheld the meaning smile that accompanied the fellow's words.

"Where do I sleep?" he demanded sharply.

"Oh, I guess you'll roll into the bunkhouse. Likely the boys 'll fix you for blankets till your truck comes along. As for orders, why, we start work at sun-up, and Slushy dips out breakfast before that. Guess I'll put you to work in the morning; you can't do a deal yet, but maybe you'll learn."

"Then I'm not wanted to-night?"

"Guess not." Jake broke off. Then he turned sharply and faced his man. "I've jest one word to say to you 'fore you start in," he went on. "We kind o' make allowance fer 'tenderfeet' around here—once. After that, we deal accordin'—savee? Say, ther' ain't no tea-parties customary around this lay-out."

Tresler smiled. If he had been killed for it he must have smiled. In that last remark the worthy Jake had shown his hand. And the latter saw the smile, and his face darkened with swift-rising anger. But he had evidently made up his mind not to be drawn, for, with a curt "S'long," he abruptly strode off, leaving the other to make his way to the bunkhouse.

The men had not yet come in for their evening meal, but he found Arizona disconsolately sitting on a roll of blankets just outside the door of the quarters. He was chewing steadily, with his face turned prairiewards, gazing out over the tawny plains as though nothing else in the world mattered to him.

He looked up casually as Tresler came along, and edged along the blankets to make room, contenting himself with a laconic—

“Set.”

The two men sat in silence for some moments. The pale-faced cowpuncher seemed absorbed in deep reflection. Tresler was thinking too; he was thinking of Jake, whom he clearly understood was in love with his employer's daughter. It was patent to the veriest simpleton. Not only that, but he felt that Diane herself knew it. The way the foreman had desisted from his murderous onslaught upon himself at her coming was sufficient evidence without the jealousy he had betrayed in his reference to tea-parties. Now he understood, too, that it was because the blind man was asleep, and in going up to the house he, Tresler, would only meet Diane, and probably spend a pleasant afternoon with her until her father awoke, that Jake's unreasoning jealousy had been aroused, and he had endeavoured to forcibly detain him. He felt glad that he had learned these things so soon. All such details would be useful.

At last Arizona turned from his impassive contemplation of the prairie.

“Wal?” he questioned. And he conveyed a world of interrogation in his monosyllable.

“Jake says I begin work to-morrow. To-night I sleep in the bunkhouse.”

“Yes, I know.”

“You know?” Tresler looked round in astonishment.

“Guess Jake's bin 'long. Say, I'll shoot that feller, sure—'less some interferin' cuss gits along an' does him in fust.”

"What's up? Anything fresh?"

For answer Arizona spat forcibly into the little pool of tobacco-juice on the ground before him. Then, with a vicious clenching of the teeth—

"He's a swine."

"Which is a libel on hogs," observed the Englishman, with a smile.

"Libel?" cried Arizona, his wild eyes rolling, and his lean nostrils dilating as his breath came short and quick. "Yes, grin; grin like a blazin' six-foot ape. Mebbe y'll change that grin later, when I tell you what he's done."

"Nothing he would do would surprise me after having met him."

"No." Arizona had calmed again. His volcanic nature was a study. Tresler, although he had only just met this man, liked him for his very wildness. "Say, pardner," he went on quietly, reaching one long, lean hand towards him, "shake! I guess I owe you gratitood fer bluffin' that hog. We see it all. Say, you've got grit." And the fierce eyes looked into the other's face.

Tresler shook the proffered hand heartily. "But what's his latest achievement?" he asked, eager to learn the fresh development.

"He come along here 'bout you. Sed we wus to fix you up in pore Dave Steele's bunk."

"Yes? That's good. I rather expected he'd have me sleep on the floor."

Arizona gave a snort. His anger was rising again, but he checked it.

"Say," he went on, "guess you don't know a heap. Ther' ain't bin a feller slep in that bunk since Dave—went away."

"Why?" Tresler's interest was agog.

"Why?" Arizona's voice rose. "'Cos it's mussed all up wi' a crazy man's blood. A crazy man as wus killed right here, kind of, by Jake Harnach."

"I heard something of it."

"Heerd suthin' of it? Wal, I guess ther' ain't a feller around this prairie as ain't yelled hisself hoarse 'bout Dave. Say, he wus the harmlessest lad as ever jerked a rope or slung a leg over a stock saddle. An' as slick a hand as ther' ever was around this ranch. I tell ye he could teach every one of us, he wus that handy; an' that's a long trail, I 'lows. Wal, we wus runnin' in a bunch of outlaws fer brandin', an' he wus makin' to rope an old bull. Howsum he got him kind o' awkward. The rope took the feller's horns. 'Fore Dave could loose it that bull got mad, an' went squar' for the corral walls an' broke a couple o' the bars. Dave jumped fer it an' got clear. Then Jake comes hollerin' an' swearin' like a stuck hog, an' Dave he took it bad. Y'see no one could handle an outlaw like Dave. He up an' let fly at Jake, an' cussed back. Wot does Jake do but grab up a brandin' iron an' lay it over the boy's head. Dave jest dropped plumb in his tracks. Then we got around and hunched him up, an' laid him out in his bunk, bleedin' awful. We plastered him, an' doctored him, an' after awhile he come to. He lay on his back fer a month, an' never a sign o' Jake or the blind man come along, on'y Miss Dianny. She come, an' we did our best. But arter a month he got up plumb crazed an' silly-like. He died back ther' in Forks soon after." Arizona paused significantly. Then he went on. "No, sir, ther' ain't bin a feller put in that bunk sense, fer they ain't never gotten pore Dave's blood off'n it. Say, ther' ain't a deal as 'ud scare us fellers, but we ain't sleepin' over a crazy man's blood."

"Which, apparently, I've got to do," Tresler said sharply. Then he asked, "Is it the only spare bunk?"

"No. Ther's Thompson's, an' ther's Massy's."

"Then what's the object?"

"Cussedness. It's a kind o' delicate attention. It's fer to git back on you, knowin' as us fellers 'ud sure to tell you of Dave. It's to kind o' hint to you what happens to them as runs foul o' him. What's like to happen to you."

Arizona's fists clenched, and his teeth gritted with rage as he deduced his facts. Tresler remained calm, but it did him good to listen to the hot-headed cowpuncher, and he warmed towards him.

"I'm afraid I must disappoint him," he said, when the other had finished. "If you fellows will lend me some blankets, I'll sleep in Massy's or Thompson's bunk, and Mr. Jake can go hang."

Arizona shot round and peered into Tresler's face. "An' you'll do that—sure?"

"Certainly. I'm not going to sleep in a filthy bunk."

"Say, you're the most cur'usest 'tenderfoot' I've seen. Shake!"

And again the two men gripped hands.

That first evening around the bunkhouse Tresler learned a lot about his new home, and, incidentally, the most artistic manner of cursing the flies. He had supper with the boys, and his food was hash and tea and dry bread. It was hard but wholesome, and there was plenty of it. His new comrades exercised their yarning propensities for him, around him, at him. He listened to their chaff, boisterous, uncultured; their savage throes of passions and easy comradeships. They seemed to have never a care in the world but the annoyances of the moment. Even their hatred for the foreman and their employer seemed to lift from them, and vanish with the sound of the curses which they heaped upon them. It was a new life, a new world to him; and a life that appealed to him.

As the sun sank and the twilight waned, the men gradually slipped away to turn in. Arizona was the last to go. Tresler had been shown Massy's bunk, and friendly hands had spread blankets upon it for him. He was standing at the foot of it in the long aisle between the double row of trestle beds. Arizona had just pointed out the dead man's disused couch, all covered with gunny sacks.

"That's Dave's," he said. "I kind o' think you'll sleep easier right here. Say, Tresler," he went on, with a serious

light in his eyes, "I'd jest like to say one thing to you, bein' an old hand round these parts myself, an' that's this. When you git kind o' worried, use your gun. Et's easy an' quick. Guess you've plenty o' time an' to spare after fer sizin' things up. Ther' ain't a man big 'nough in this world to lift a finger ef you sez 'no' and a' got your gun pointin' right. S' long."

But Tresler detained him. "Just one moment, Arizona," he said, imitating the other's impressive manner. "I'd just like to say one thing to you, being a new hand around these parts myself, and that's this. You being about my size, I wonder if you could sell me a pair of pants, such as you fellows ordinarily wear?"

The cowpuncher smiled a pallid, shadowy smile, and went over to his kit-bag. He returned a moment later with a pair of new moleskin trousers and threw them on the bunk.

"You ken have them, I guess. Kind o' remembrancer fer talkin' straight to Jake. Say, that did me a power o' good."

"Thanks, but I'll pay——"

"Not on your life, mister."

"Then I'll remember your advice."

"Good. S'long."

CHAPTER IV

THE NIGHT-RIDERS

TRESLER had not the smallest inclination for sleep. He was tired enough physically, but his brain was still much too active. Besides, the bunkhouse was uninviting to him as yet. The two lines of trestle-beds, with their unkempt occupants, were suggestive of—well, anything but congenial sleeping companions. The atmosphere was close and stuffy, and the yellow glimmer of the two oil-lamps, one stationed at each end of the room, gave the place a distasteful suggestion of squalor.

He was not unduly squeamish; far from it; but, be it remembered, he had only just left a world of ease and luxury, where snow-white linen and tasteful surroundings were necessary adjuncts to existence. Therefore these things came to him in the nature of a shock.

He looked at his blankets spread over the straw palliasse that disguised the loose bed-boards underneath, and this drew his attention to the mattress itself. It was well-worn and dusty, and as he moved it he felt that the straw inside was crushed to the smallest chaff. He laid it back carefully so as not to disturb the dust, and rearranged the blankets over it. Then he sat on the foot of it and pondered.

He gazed about him at the other beds. Some of the men were already sleeping, announcing the fact more or less loudly. Others were swathed in their blankets smoking in solemn silence. One was deep in the blood-curdling pages of a dime

novel, straining his eyes in the fitful light of the lamps. The scene had novelty for him, but it was not altogether enthralling, so he filled his pipe and lit it, and passed out into the fresh night air. It was only ten o'clock, and he felt that a smoke and a comfortable think would be pleasant before facing the charms of his dusty couch.

The moon had not yet risen, but the starry sheen of the sky dimly outlined everything. He was gazing upon the peaceful scene of a ranch when night has spread her soft, velvety wings. There were few sounds to distract his thoughts. The air still hummed with the busy insect life; one of the prowling ranch dogs occasionally gave tongue, its fiercely suspicious temper no doubt aroused by some vague shadow which surely no other eyes than his could possibly have detected in the darkness; sometimes the distressful plaint of a hungry coyote, hunting for what he never seems to find—for he is always prowling and hunting—would rouse the echoes and startle the 'tender-foot' with the suddenness and nearness of its uncanny call. But for the rest all was still. And he paced to and fro before the bunkhouse, thinking.

And, strangely enough, of all the scenes he had witnessed that day, and of all the people he had met, it was the scenes in which Diane Marbolt had taken part, and of her he mostly thought. Perhaps it was the unexpectedness of meeting a girl so charming that held him interested. Perhaps it was the eager desire she had displayed in warning him of his personal danger. Perhaps, even, it was the recollection of the soft, brown eyes, the charming little sun-tanned face that had first looked up at him from beneath the broad-brimmed straw hat. Certain it was her sad face haunted him as no woman's face had ever haunted him before as he looked out on the vast, dark world about him. He felt that he would like to know something of her story; not out of idle curiosity, but that he might discover some means of banishing the look of sadness so out of place upon her beautiful features.

His pipe burned out, and he recharged and lit it afresh;

then he extended his peregrinations. He moved out of the deeper shadows of the bunkhouse and turned the corner in the direction of the western group of corrals.

Now he saw the foreman's hut beyond the dark outline of the great implement shed, and a light was still shining in the window. Turning away he passed to the left of the shed, and strolled leisurely on to the corrals. He had no desire in the world to meet Jake Harnach; not that he thought such a contingency likely, but still there was always the chance if the man had not yet gone to bed. He had already decided that the less he saw of Jake the better it would be for both of them. He remained for some minutes seated on the top of the corral fence, but the mosquitoes were too thick, and drove him to further wanderings.

Just as he was about to move away, he saw the door of the foreman's hut open, and, in the light that shone behind, the small figure of the choreman, Joe Nelson, come out. Then the light was shut out as the great figure of Jake blocked the doorway. Now he distinctly heard them speaking.

"I shall want it first thing in the morning," said the foreman, in his great hoarse voice.

"Guess I'll see to it," replied Joe; "but 'tain't the saddle fer anybody who ain't used to it."

"That's o' no consequence. Your business is to have it there."

Then Jake retired, and the door was shut. A moment later the waiting man saw Joe emerge from the shadow and stump off in the direction of the bunkhouse. A few yards from the foreman's hut he halted and turned about. Then Tresler witnessed something that made him smile, while it raised a lively feeling of satisfaction in his heart. Joe slowly raised one arm in the direction of the hut, and, although the light was insufficient for him to see it, and he could hear no words, he felt sure that the fist was clenched, and a string of blasphemous invective was desecrating the purity of the night

air. A moment later Joe passed leisurely on his way, and the light went out in Jake's dwelling.

And now, without concerning himself with his direction, Tresler continued his walk. He moved towards an open shed crowded with waggons. This he skirted, intending to avoid the foreman's hut, but just as he moved out from the shadow, he became aware that Jake's door had opened again and some one was coming out. He waited for a moment listening. He fancied he recognized the foreman's heavy tread. Curiosity prompted him to inquire further, but he checked the impulse. After all, the bully's doings were no concern of his. So he waited until the sound of receding footsteps had died out, and then passed round the back of the shed and strolled on.

There was nothing now in front of him but the dense black line of the boundary pinewoods. These stretched away to the right and left as far as the darkness permitted him to see. The blackness of their depths was like a solid barrier, and he had neither time nor inclination to explore them at that hour. Therefore he skirted away to the right, intending to leave the forest edge before he came to the rancher's house, and so make his way back to his quarters.

He was approaching the house, and it loomed dark and rigid before him. Gazing upon it, his mind at once reverted to its blind owner, and he found himself wondering if he were in bed yet, if Diane had retired, and in which portion of the house she slept.

His pipe had gone out again, and he paused to re-light it. He had his matches in his hand, and was about to strike one, when suddenly a light flashed out in front of him. It came and was gone in a second. Yet it lasted long enough for him to realize that it came from a window, and the window, he knew, from its position, must be the window of Julian Marbolt's bedroom.

He waited for it to reappear, but the house remained in darkness; and, after a moment's deliberation, he realized its

meaning. The door of the blind man's room must be opposite the window, and probably it was the opening of it that had revealed the lamp light in the hall. The thought suggested the fact that the rancher had just gone to bed.

He turned his attention again to his pipe; but he seemed destined not to finish his smoke. Just as he had the match poised for a second time, his ears, now painfully acute in the stillness about him, caught the sound of horse's hoofs moving through the forest.

They sounded quite near; he even heard the gush of the animal's nostrils. He peered into the depths. Then, suddenly realizing the strangeness of his own position lurking so near the house and under cover of the forest at that hour of the night, he dropped down in the shadow of a low bush. Nor was it any too soon, for, a moment or two later, he beheld two horsemen moving slowly towards him out of the black depths. They came on until they were within half a dozen yards of him, and almost at the edge of the woods. Then they drew up and sat gazing out over the ranch in silent contemplation.

Tresler strained his eyes to obtain a knowledge of their appearance, but the darkness thwarted him. He could see the vague outline of the man nearest him, but it was so uncertain that he could make little of it. One thing only he ascertained, and that was because the figure was silhouetted against the starlit sky. The man seemed to have his face covered with something that completely concealed his profile.

The whole scene passed almost before he realized it. The horsemen had appeared so suddenly, and were gone so swiftly, returning through the forest the way they had come, that he was not sure but that the whole apparition had been a mere trick of imagination. Rising swiftly, he gazed after the vanished riders, and the crunching of the pine cones under the horses' hoofs, dying slowly away as they retreated, warned him that the stealthy, nocturnal visit was no illusion, but a curious fact that needed explanation.

Just for an instant it occurred to him that it might be two of the hands out on night work around the cattle, then he remembered that the full complement were even now slumbering in the bunkhouse. Puzzled and somewhat disquieted, he turned his steps in the direction of his quarters, fully intending to go to bed; but his adventures were not over yet.

As he drew near his destination he observed the figure of a man, bearing something on his back, coming slowly towards him. A moment later he was looking down upon the diminutive person of Joe Nelson in the act of carrying a saddle upon his shoulder.

"Hello, Nelson, where are you going at this hour of the night?" he asked, as he came face to face with the little man.

The choreman deposited the saddle on the ground, and looked his man up and down before he answered.

"Wher' am I goin'?" he said, as though he were thinking of other things. "I guess I'm doin' a job now in case I git fergettin' by the mornin'. Jake reckons to want my saddle in the mornin' over at the hoss corrals. But, say, why ain't you abed, Mr. Tresler?"

"Never mind the 'mister,' Joe," Tresler said amiably. "If you're going to the horse corrals now I'll go with you. I'm so beastly wide awake I can't turn in yet."

"Come right along, then. Guess I ain't feelin' that ways, sure."

Joe jerked his saddle up and slung it across his back again, and the two men walked off in silence.

And as they walked, Joe, under cover of the darkness, eyed his companion with occasional sidelong glances, speculating as to what he wanted with him. He quite understood that his companion was not walking with him for the pleasure of his company. On his part Tresler was wondering how much he ought to tell this man—almost a stranger—of what he had seen. He felt that some one ought to know—some one with more experience than himself. He felt certain

that the stealthy visit of the two horsemen was not wholesome. Such espionage pointed to something that was not quite open and above-board.

They reached the corrals, and Joe deposited his burden upon the wooden wall. Then he turned sharply on his companion.

"Wal, out wi' it, man," he demanded. "Guess you got something you're wantin' to git off'n your chest."

Tresler laughed softly. "You're pretty sharp, Joe."

"Pretty sharp, eh?" returned the little man. "Say, it don't need no razor to cut through the meanin' of a 'tenderfoot.' Wal?"

Tresler was looking up at the saddle. It was a small, almost skeleton saddle, such as, at one time, was largely used in Texas; that was before the heavier and more picturesque Mexican saddles came into vogue among the ranchmen.

"What does Jake want that for?" he asked.

His question was an idle one, and merely put for the sake of gaining time while he arrived at a definite decision upon the other matter.

"Guess it's fer some feller to ride to-morrow—eh? Whew!"

The choreman broke off and whistled softly. Something had just occurred to him. He measured Tresler with his eye, and then looked at the short-seated saddle with its high cantle and tall, abrupt horn in front. He shook his head.

Tresler was not heeding him. Suddenly he stooped and sat on the ground, propping his back against the corral wall, while he looked up at Joe.

"Sit down," he said seriously; "I've got something rather particular I want to talk about. At least, I think it's particular, being a stranger to the country."

Without replying, Joe deposited himself on the ground beside his new acquaintance. His face was screwed up into the expression Tresler had begun to recognize as a smile. He took a chew of tobacco and prepared to give his best attention.

"Git goin'," he observed easily.

"Well, look here, have we any near neighbours?"

"None nigher than Forks—'cep' the Breeds, an' they're nigh on six mile south, out towards the hills. How?"

Then Tresler told him what he had seen at the edge of the pinewoods, and the choreman listened with careful attention. At the end of his story Tresler added—

"You see, it's probably nothing. Of course, I know nothing as yet of prairie ways and doings. No doubt it can be explained. But I argued the matter out from my own point of view, and it struck me that two horsemen, approaching the ranch under cover of the forest and a dark night, and not venturing into the open after having arrived, simply didn't want to be seen. And their not wishing to be seen meant that their object in coming wasn't—well, just above suspicion."

"Tol'ble reasonin'," nodded Joe, chewing his cud reflectively.

"What do you make of it?"

"A whole heap," Joe said, spitting emphatically. "What do I make of it? Yes, that's it, a whole heap. Guess that feller you see most of had his face covered. Was that cover a mask?"

"It might have been."

"A red mask?"

"I couldn't see the colour. It was too dark. Might have been."

Joe turned and faced his companion, and, hunching his bent knees into his arms, looked squarely into his eyes.

"See here, pard, guess you never heard o' hoss thieves? They ain't likely to mean much to you," he said, with some slight contempt. Then he added, by way of rubbing it in, "You bein' a 'tenderfoot.' Guess you ain't heard tell of Red Mask an' his gang, neither?"

"Wrong twice," observed Tresler, with a quiet smile. "I've heard of both horse thieves and Red Mask."

"You've heard tell of hoss thieves an' Red Mask? Wal,

I'm figgerin' you've seen both to-night, anyway ; an' I'll further tell you this—if you'd got the drop on him this night an' brought him down, you'd a' done what most every feller fer two hundred miles around has been layin' to do fer years, an' you'd a' been the biggest pot in Alberta by sundown to-morrow." He spoke with an accent of triumph, and paused for effect. "Say, ther' wouldn't a' been a feller around as wouldn't a' taken his hat off to you," he went on, to accentuate the situation. "Say, it was a 'dandy chance. But ther', you're a 'tenderfoot,'" he added, with a sigh of profound regret.

Tresler was inclined to laugh, but checked himself as he realized the serious side of the matter.

"Well, if he were here to-night, what does it portend?" he asked.

"If he was here to-night it portends a deal," said Joe, sharply. "It portends that the biggest 'tough,' the biggest man-killer an' hoss thief in the country, is on the war-path, an' ther'll be trouble around 'fore we're weeks older."

"Who is he?"

"Who is he? Wal, I 'lows that's a big question. Guess ther' ain't no real sayin'. Some sez he's from across Montana, some sez he's a Breed, some sez he's the feller called Duncan, as used to run a bum saloon in Calford, an' shot a man in his own bar an' skipped. No one rightly knows, 'cep' he's real 'bad,' an' duffs nigh on to a thousand head o' stock most every year."

"Then what's to be done?" Tresler asked, watching the little man's twisted face as he munched his tobacco.

"What's to be done? Wal, I don't rightly know. Say, what wus you doin' around that house? I ain't askin' fer cur'osity. Ye see, if you got tellin' Jake as you wus 'round ther', it's likely he'd git real mad. Y'see, Jake's dead sweet on Miss Dianny. It gives him the needle that I'm around that house. O' course, ther' ain't nuthin' wi' me an' Miss Dianny, 'cep' we're kind o' friendly. But Jake's that mean-sperrited an' jealous. She hates him like pizen. I know

'cos I'm kind o' friendly wi' her, so to speak, meanin' nuthin', o' course. But that ain't the point. If you wus to tell him he'd make your head swim."

"Oh, confound Jake!" exclaimed Tresler, impatiently; "I'm sick to death of hearing of his terrorizing. He can't eat me——"

"No, but he'll make you wish he could," put in the choreman, quietly.

"He'd find me a tough mouthful," Tresler laughed.

"Mebbe. How came you around that house?"

"I simply wandered there by chance. I was smoking and taking a stroll. I'd been all round the ranch."

"That wouldn't suit Jake. No." Joe was silent for a moment.

Tresler waited. At last the little man made a move and spat out his chew.

"That's it," he said, slapping his thigh triumphantly—"that's it, sure. Say, we needn't to tell Jake nuthin'. I'll git around among the boys, an' let 'em know as I heerd tell of Red Mask bein' in the region o' the Bend, an' how a Breed give me warnin', bein' scared to come along to the ranch lest Red Mask got wind of it an' shut his dead lights fer him. Ther' ain't no use in rilin' Jake. Meanin' for you. He's layin' fer you anyways, as I'm guessin' you'll likely know? Savee? Lie low, most as low as a dead cat in a well. I'll play this hand, wi'out you figgerin' in it; which, fer you, I guess, is best."

Tresler got up and dusted his clothes. There was a slight pause while he fingered the leather-capped stirrups of the stock saddle on the wall.

Joe grew impatient. "Wal?" he said at last; "y' ain't bustin' wi' 'preciation."

"On the contrary, I appreciate your shrewdness and kindly interest on my behalf most cordially," Tresler replied, dropping the stirrup and turning to his companion; "but, you see, there's one little weakness in the arrangement. Jake's

liable to under-estimate the importance of the nocturnal visits unless he knows the real facts. Besides——”

“Besides,” broke in Joe, with an impatience bred of his reading through Tresler’s lame objection, “you jest notion to rile Jake some. Wal, you’re a fool, Tresler—a dog-gone fool ! Guess you’ll strike a snag, an’ snags mostly hurts. Howsum, I ain’t no wet-nurse, an’ ef you think to bluff Jake Harnach, get right ahead an’ bluff. An’ when you bluff, bluff hard, an’ back it, or you’ll drop your wad sudden. Guess I’ll turn in.”

Joe moved off and Tresler followed. At the door of the bunkhouse they parted, for Joe slept in a lean-to against the kitchen of the rancher’s house. They had said “good-night,” and Joe was moving away when he suddenly changed his mind and came back again.

“Say, ther’ ain’t nothin’ like a ‘tenderfoot’ fer bein’ a fool, ’less it’s a settin’ hen,” he said, with profound contempt but with evident good will. “You’re kind o’ gritty, Tresler, I guess, but mebbe you’ll be ast to git across a tol’ble broncho in the mornin’. That’s as may be. But ef it’s so, jest take two thinks ’fore settin’ your six foot o’ body on a saddle built fer a feller o’ five foot one. It ain’t reason’ble, an’ it’s dangerous. It’s most like tryin’ to do that as isn’t, never wus, and ain’t like to be, an’ if it did, wouldn’t amount to a heap any way, ’cep’ it’s a heap o’ foolishness.”

Tresler laughed. “All right. Two into one won’t go without leaving a lot over. Good-night, Joe.”

“So long. Them fellers as gits figgerin’ mostly gits crazed fer doin’ what’s impossible. Guess I ain’t stuck on figgers nohow.”

And the man vanished into the night, while Tresler passed into the bunkhouse to get what little sleep his first night as a ranchman might afford him.

CHAPTER V

TRESLER BEGINS HIS EDUCATION

BUT the story of the nocturnal visit of the horse thieves did not reach the foreman next morning. Jake hailed Tresler down to the corrals directly after breakfast. He was to have a horse told off to him, and this matter, and the presence of others, made him postpone his purpose to a more favourable time.

When he arrived at the corrals, three of the boys, under Jake's superintendence, were cutting out a big, raw-boned, mud-brown mare from a bunch of about sixty colts.

She stood well over sixteen hands—a clumsy, big-footed, mean-looking, clean-limbed lady, rough-coated, and scored all over with marks of "savaging." She was fiddle-headed and as lean as a hay-rake, but in build she was every inch a grand piece of horseflesh. And Tresler was sufficient horseman to appreciate her lines, as well as the vicious, roving eye which displayed the flashing whites at every turn.

Jacob Smith was after her with a rope, and the on-lookers watched his lithe, active movements as he followed her, wildly racing round and round the corral seeking a means of escape.

Suddenly the man made a dart in to head her off. She turned to retreat, but the other two were there to frustrate her purpose. Just for a second she paused irresolutely; then, lowering her head and setting her ears back, she came open-mouthed for Jacob. But he anticipated her intention, and, as

she came, sprang lightly aside, while she swept on, lashing out her heels at him as she went. It was the opportunity the man sought, and, in the cloud of dust that rose in her wake, his lariat shot out low over the ground. The next moment she fell headlong, roped by the two fore feet, and all three men sprang in to the task of securing her.

It was done so quickly that Tresler had hardly realized her capture when Jake's harsh voice rang out—

"That's your mare, Tresler!" he cried; "guess that plug of yours 'll do for fancy ridin'. You'll break this one to handlin' cattle. You're a tolerable weight, but she's equal to it." He laughed, and his laugh sent an angry flush into the other's face. "Say," he went on, in calmly contemptuous tones; "she's wild some. But she's been saddled before. Oh yes, she ain't raw off the grass. You, comin' from the old country, can mebbe ride. They mostly reckon to be able to ride till they come along to these parts."

Tresler understood the man's game; he also understood and fully appreciated Joe Nelson's warning. He glanced at the saddle still hanging on the corral wall. It would be simple suicide for him to attempt to ride an outlaw with a saddle fit for a boy of fifteen. And it was Jake's purpose, trading on his ignorance of such matters, to fool him into using a saddle that would probably rupture him.

"I presume she's the worst outlaw on the ranch," he replied quietly, though his blue eyes shone dangerously. "She must be," he went on, as Jake made no answer, "or you wouldn't give her to me, and point out that she's been saddled before."

"Kind o' weakenin'?" Jake asked with a sneer.

"No. I was just thinking of my saddle. It will be no use on her; she'd burst the girths."

"That needn't worry you any. There's a stock saddle there, on the fence."

"Thank you, I'll ride on a saddle that fits a man of my size, or you can ride the mare yourself."

Tresler was round and facing his man, and his words came in a tone the other was unaccustomed to. But Jake kept quite cool while he seemed to be debating with himself. Then he abruptly turned away with a short, vicious laugh.

"Guess the 'tenderfoot's' plumb scared to ride her, boys," he called out to the men, relapsing into the vernacular as he addressed them. "Any o' you boys lendin' a saddle, or shall we find him a rockin'-hoss to run around on?"

Tresler fell headlong into the trap. Jake had drawn him with a skill worthy of a better object.

"If there is anybody scared, I don't think it is I, boys," he said with a laugh as harsh as Jake's had been. "If one of you will lend me a man's saddle, I'll break that mare or she'll break me."

Now, Tresler was a very ordinary horseman. He had never in his life sat on a horse that knew the first rudiments of bucking; but at that moment he would have mounted to the back of any horse, even if his life were to pay the forfeit next moment. Besides, even in his blind anger, he realized that this sort of experience must come sooner or later. "Broncho-busting" would be part of his training. Therefore, when some one suggested Arizona's saddle—since Arizona was on the sick list—he jumped at the chance, for that individual was about his size.

The mare was now on her legs again, and stood ready bridled, while two men held her with the lariat drawn tight over her windpipe. She stood as still as a rock, and, to judge by the flashing of her eyes, inwardly raging. They led her out of the corral, and Arizona's saddle was brought and the stirrups adjusted to Tresler's requirements. She was taken well clear of the buildings into the open, and Jacob, with the subtlety and art acquired by long practice in breaking horses, proceeded to saddle her. Lew and Raw Harris choked her quiet with the lariat, and though she physically attempted to resent the indignity of being saddled, the cinchas were drawn tight.

Tresler had come over by himself, leaving Jake to watch the proceedings from the vantage ground of the rise towards the house. He was quite quiet, and the boys stole occasional apprehensive glances at him. They knew this mare; they knew that she was a hopeless outlaw and fit only for the knacker's yard. At last Jacob beckoned him over.

"Say, ther' ain't no need fer you to ride her, mister," he said, feeling that it was his duty as a man to warn him. "She's the worstest devil on the range, an' she'll break your neck an' jump on you with her maulin' great hoofs, sure. I guess ther' ain't a 'buster' in the country 'ud tackle her fer less 'an a fi' dollar wager, she's that mean."

"And she looks all you say of her, Jacob," replied Tresler, with a grim smile. "Thanks for your warning, but I'm going to try and ride her," he went on with quiet decision. "Not because I think I can, but because that bully up there"—with a nod in Jake's direction—"would only be too glad of the chance of taunting me with 'weakening.' She shall throw me till she makes it a physical impossibility for me to mount her again. All I ask is that you fellows stand by to keep her off when I'm on the ground."

By this time Jacob had secured the saddle, and now Tresler walked round the great beast, patting her gently and speaking to her. And she watched him with an evil, staring eye that boded nothing good. Then he took a raw-hide quirt from Jacob and, twisting it on his wrist, mounted her, while the men kept the choking rope taut about her throat, and she stood like a statue, except for the heaving of her sides as she gasped for breath.

He gathered the reins up, which had been passed through the noose of the lariat, and sat ready. Jacob drew off, and held the end of the rope. Tresler gave the word. The two men left her, while, with a shake and a swift jerk, Jacob flung the lariat clear of the mare's head. In an instant the battle had begun.

Down went the lady's head (the boys called her by a less

complimentary name), and she shot into the air with her back humped till she shaped like an inverted U with its extremities narrowed and almost touching. There was no see-saw bucking about her. It was stiff-legged, with her four feet bunched together and her great fiddle-head lost in their midst. And at the first jump Tresler shot a foot out of the saddle, lurched forward and then back, and finally came down where he had started from. And as he fell heavily into the saddle his hand struck against a coiled blanket strap behind the cantle, and he instinctively grabbed hold of it and clung to it for dear life.

Up she shot again, and deliberately swung round in the air and came down with her head where her tail had been. It was a marvellous, cat-like spring, calculated to unseat the best of horsemen. Tresler was half out of the saddle again, but the blanket strap saved him, and the next buck threw him back into his seat. Now her jumps came like the shots from a gatling gun, and the man on her back was dazed, and his head swam, and he felt the blood rushing to his ear drums. But with desperate resolve he clung to his strap, and so retained his seat. But it couldn't last, and he knew it, although those looking on began to have hopes that he would tire the vixen out. But they didn't know the demon that possessed her.

Suddenly it seemed as though an accident had happened to her. Her legs absolutely shot from under her as she landed from one terrific buck, and she plunged to the ground. Then her intention became apparent. But luckily the antic had defeated its own end, for Tresler was flung wide, and, as she rolled on the ground, he scrambled clear of her body.

He struggled to his feet, but not before she had realized his escape, and, with the savage instinct of a man-eater, had sprung to her feet and was making for him open-mouthed. It was Jacob's readiness and wonderful skill that saved him. The rope whistled through the air and caught her, the noose

falling over her head with scarcely room between her nose and her victim's back for the rawhide to pass. In a flash the strands strung tight, and her head swung round with such a jolt that she was almost thrown from her feet.

Again she was choked down, and Tresler, breathing desperately, but with his blood fairly up, was on top of her almost before the man holding her realized his intention. The mare was foaming at the mouth, and a lather of sweat dripped from her tuckered flanks. The whites of her eyes were flaming scarlet now, and when she was let loose again she tried to savage her rider's legs. Failing this, she threw her head up violently, and, all unprepared for it, Tresler received the blow square in the mouth. Then she was up on her hind legs, fighting the air with her front feet, and a moment later crashed over backwards. And again it seemed like a miracle that he escaped; he slid out of the saddle, not of his own intention, and rolled clear as she came down.

This time she was caught before she could struggle to her feet, and when at last she stood up she was dazed and shaken, though still unconquered.

Again Tresler mounted. He was bruised and bleeding, and shaking as with an ague. And now the mare tried a new move. She bucked; but it was a running buck, her body twisting and writhing with curious serpentine undulations, and her body seemed to shrink under his legs as though the brute were drawing in her whole frame of a settled purpose. Then, having done enough in this direction, she suddenly stood, and began to kick violently, with her head stretched low between her fore legs. And Tresler felt himself sliding, saddle and all, over her withers! Suddenly the blanket strap failed him. It cracked and gave, and he shot from the saddle like a new-fired rocket.

And when the mare had been caught again she was without the saddle, which was now lying close to where her rider had fallen. She had bucked and kicked herself clean through the still fastened cinchas.

Tresler was bleeding from nose and ears when he mounted again. The saddle was cinched up very tight, and the mare herself was so blown that she was unable to distend herself to resist the pressure. But, nevertheless, she fought as though a devil possessed her, and, exhausted, and without the help of the blanket strap, he was thrown again and again. Five times he fell; and each time, as no bones were broken, he remounted her. But he was growing helpless.

But the men looking on realized that which was lost upon the rider himself. The mare was done; she was fairly beaten. The fifth time he climbed into the saddle her bucks wouldn't have thrown a babe; and when they beheld this, they, with one accord, shouted to him.

"Say, thrash her, boy! Lace h—— out of her!" roared Jacob.

"Cut her liver out wi' that quirt!" cried Lew.

"Ay, run her till she can't see," added Raw.

And Tresler obeyed mechanically. He was too exhausted to do much; but he managed to bring the quirt down over her shoulders, until, maddened with pain, she rose up on her hind legs, gave a mighty bound forward, and raced away down the trail like a creature possessed.

It was dinner-time when Tresler saw the ranch again. He returned with the mare jaded and docile. He had recovered from the battle, while she had scarcely energy enough to put one foot before the other. She was conquered. To use Arizona's expression, when, from the doorway of the bunk-house, he saw the mare crawling up the trail towards the ranch—

"Guess she's loaded down till her springs is nigh busted."

And Tresler laughed outright in Jake's face when that individual came into the barn, while he was rubbing her down, and generally returning good for evil, and found fault with his work.

"Where, I'd like to know, have you been all this time?"

he asked angrily. Then, as his eyes took in the pitiful sight of the exhausted mare, "Say, you've ruined that mare, and you'll have to make it good. We don't keep horses for the hands to founder. D'you see what you've done? You've broke her heart."

"And if I'd had the chance I'd have broken her neck too," Tresler retorted, with so much heat, that, in self-defence, the foreman was forced to leave him alone.

That afternoon the real business of ranching began. Lew Cawley was sent out with Tresler to instruct him in mending barbed-wire fences. A distant pasture had been broken into by the roving cattle outside. Lew remained with him long enough to show him how to strain the wires up and splice them, then he rode off to other work.

Tresler was glad to find himself out on the prairie away from the unbearable influence of the ranch foreman. The afternoon was hot, but it was bright with the sunshine, which, in the shadow of the mountains, is so bracing. The pastures he was working in were different from the lank weedy-grown prairie, although of the same origin. They were irrigated, and had been sown and re-sown with Timothy grass and clover. The grass rose high up to the horse's knees as he rode, and the quiet, hard-working animal, his own property, revelled in the sweet-scented fodder which he could nip at as he moved leisurely along.

And Tresler worked very easily that afternoon. Not out of indolence, not out of any ill-feeling towards his foreman. He was weary after his morning's exertions, and, besides, the joy of being out in the pure, bright air, on that wondrous sea of rolling green grass with its illimitable suggestion of freedom and its gracious odours, seduced him to an indolence quite foreign to him. He was beyond the view of the ranch, with two miles of prairie rollers intervening, so he did his work without concern for time.

It was well after four o'clock when the last strand of wire was strung tight. Then, for want of a shady tree to lean his

back against, he sat down by a fence post and smoked, while his horse, with girths loosened, and bit removed from its mouth, grazed joyfully near by.

And then he slept. The peace of the prairie world got hold of him ; the profound silence lulled his fagged nerves, his pipe went out, and he slept.

He awoke with a start. Nor, for the moment, did he know where he was. His pipe had fallen from his mouth, and he found himself stretched full length upon the ground. But something unusual had awakened him, and when he had gathered his scattered senses he looked about him to ascertain what the nature of the disturbance had been. The next moment a laughing voice hailed him.

"Is this the way you learn ranching, Mr. Tresler? Oh, shame ! Sleeping the glorious hours of sunshine away."

It was the rich, gentle voice of Diane Marbolt, and its tone was one of quiet raillery. She was gazing down at him from the back of her sturdy broncho mare, Bessie, with eyes from which, for the moment at least, all sadness had vanished.

Just now her lips were wreathed in a bright smile, and her soft brown eyes were dancing with a joyous light, which, when Tresler had first seen her, had seemed impossible to them. She was out on the prairie, on the back of her favourite, Bessie ; she was away from the ranch, from the home that possessed so many cares for her. She was out in her world, the world she loved, the world that was the only world for her, breathing the pure, delicious air which, even in moments of profound unhappiness, had still power to carry her back to the days of happy, careless childhood ; had still power to banish all but pleasant thoughts, and to bestow upon her that wild sense of freedom such as is only given to those who have made their home on its virgin bosom.

Tresler beheld this girl now in her native mood. He saw before him the true child of the prairie such as she really was. She was clad in a blue dungaree habit and straw sun-hat, and he marvelled at the ravishing picture she made. He raised

himself upon his elbow and stared at her, and a sensation of delight swept over him as he devoured each detail of face and figure. Then, suddenly, he was recalled to his senses by the abrupt fading of the smile from the face before him; and he flushed with a rueful sense of guiltiness.

"Fairly caught napping, Miss Marbolt," he said, in confusion. "I acknowledge the sloth, but not the implied laxness anent ranching. Believe me, I have learned an ample lesson to-day. I now have a fuller appreciation of our worthy foreman; a fair knowledge of the horse, most accurately termed 'outlaw,' as the bruised condition of my body can testify; and, as for barbed-wire fencing, I really believe I have discovered every point in its construction worthy of consideration."

He raised a pair of lacerated hands for the girl's inspection, and rose, smiling, to his feet.

"I apologize." Diane was smiling again now as she noted the network of scratches upon his outspread palms. "You certainly have not been idle," she added, significantly.

Then she became serious with a suddenness that showed how very near the surface, how strongly marked was that quiet, thoughtful nature her companion had first realized in her.

"But I saw you on that mare, and I thought you would surely be killed. Do you know they've tried to break her for two seasons, and failed hopelessly. What happened after she bolted?"

"Oh, nothing much. I rode her to Forks and back twice."

"Forty miles! Good gracious! What is she like now?"

"Done up, of course. Jake assures me I've broken her heart; but I haven't. My Lady Jezebel has a heart of stone that would take something in the nature of a sledge-hammer to break. She'll buck like the mischief again to-morrow."

"Yes."

The girl nodded. She had witnessed the battle between

the "tenderfoot" and the mare; and, now that it was all over, she felt pleased that he had won. And there was no mistaking the approval in the glance she gave him. She understood the spirit that had moved him to drive the mare that forty miles; nor, in spite of a certain sympathy for the jaded creature, did she condemn him for it. She was too much a child of the prairie to morbidly sentimentalize over the matter. The mare was a savage of the worst type, and she knew that prairie horses in their breaking often require drastic treatment. It was the stubborn, purposeful character of the man that she admired, and thought most of. He had carried out a task that the best horsebreaker in the country might reasonably have shrunk from, and all to please the brutal nature of Jake Harnach.

"And you've christened her 'Lady Jezebel'?" she asked.

Tresler laughed. "Why yes, it seems to suit her," he said indifferently.

Then a slight pause followed which amounted almost to awkwardness. The girl had come to find him. Her visit was not a matter of chance. She wanted to talk to this Englishman. And, somehow, Tresler understood that this was so. For some moments she sat stroking Bessie's shoulder with her rawhide riding-switch. The mare grew restive. She, too, seemed to understand something of the awkwardness, and did her best to break it up by one or two of her frivolous gambols. When she had been pacified, the girl leaned forward in her saddle and looked straight into her companion's eyes.

"Tell me," she said, abruptly; "why did you ride that animal?"

The man laughed a little harshly. "Because—well, because I hadn't sense enough to refuse, I suppose."

"Ah, I understand. Jake Harnach."

Tresler shrugged.

"I came out purposely to speak to you," the girl went on, in a quiet, direct manner. There was not the least embarrassment now. She had made up her mind to avoid

all chance of misunderstanding. "I want to put matters quite plainly before you. This morning's business was only a sequel to your meeting with Jake, or rather, a beginning of the sequel."

Tresler shook his head and smiled. "Not the beginning of the sequel. That occurred last evening, after I left you."

Diane looked a swift inquiry.

"Yes, Jake is not an easy man. But believe me, Miss Marbolt, you need have no fear. I see what it is; you, in the kindness of your heart, dread that I, a stranger here in your land, in your home, may be maltreated, or even worse by that unconscionable ruffian. Knowing your father's affliction, you fear that I have no protection from Jake's murderous savagery, and you are endeavouring bravely to thrust your frail self between us, and so stave off a catastrophe. Have no fear. I do not anticipate a collision. He is only an atrocious bully."

"He is more than that. You under-estimate him."

The girl's face had darkened. Her lips were firmly compressed, and an angry fire burned in her usually soft eyes.

Tresler, watching, read the hatred for Jake; read the hatred, and saw that which seemed so out of place in the reliant little face. A pronounced fear was also expressed, and the two were so marked that it was hard to say which feeling predominated. Hatred had stirred depths of fire in her beautiful eyes, but fear had paled her features, had set drawn lines about her mouth and brows. He wondered.

"You are right, Mr. Tresler, in that you think I dread for your safety," she went on presently. "It was certainly that dread that brought me out here to-day. You do not anticipate a collision because you are a brave man. You have no fear, therefore you give no thought to possibilities. I am weak and a woman, and I see with eyes of understanding and knowledge of Jake, and I know that the collision will be forced upon you; and, further, when the trouble comes, Jake will take no chances. But you must not think too well

of me. Believe me, there is selfishness at the root of my anxiety. Do you not see what trouble it will cause to us; my father, me?"

Tresler looked away. The girl had a strange insistence. It seemed to him folly to consider the matter so seriously. He was convinced that she was holding something back; that she was concealing her real reason—perhaps the reason of her own fear of Jake—for thus importuning him. It did not take him long to make up his mind with those lovely, appealing eyes upon him. He turned back to her with a frank smile, and held out his hand. Diane responded, and they shook hands like two friends making a bargain.

"You are right, Miss Marbolt," he said. "I promise you to do all in my power to keep the peace with Jake. But," and here he held up a finger in mock warning, "anything in the nature of a physical attack will be resented—to the last."

Diane nodded. She had obtained all the assurance he would give, she knew, and wisely refrained from further pressure.

Now a silence fell. The sun was drooping low in the west, and already the shadows on the grass were lengthening. Tresler brought his grazing horse back. When he returned Diane reverted to something he had said before.

"This 'sequel' you spoke of. You didn't tell me it." Her manner had changed, and she spoke almost lightly.

"The matter of the sequel was a trivial affair, and only took the form of Jake's spleen in endeavouring to make my quarters as uncomfortable for me as possible. No, the incident I had chiefly in mind was something altogether different. It was all so strange—so very strange," he went on reflectively. "One adventure on top of another ever since my arrival. The last, and strangest of all, did not occur until nearly midnight."

He looked up with a smile, but only to find that Diane's attention was apparently wandering.

The girl was gazing out over the waving grass-land with

deep, brooding, dreamy eyes. There was no anger in them now, only her features looked a little more drawn and hard. The man waited for a moment, then as she did not turn he went on.

"You have strange visitors at the ranch, Miss Marbolt—very strange. They come stealthily in the dead of night; they come through the shelter of the pinewoods, where it is dark, almost black, at night. They come with faces masked—at least one face——"

He got no further. There was no lack of effect now. Diane was round upon him, gazing at him with frightened eyes.

"You saw them?" she cried; and a strident ring had replaced her usually soft tones.

"Them? Who?"

For a moment they stared into each other's eyes. He inquiringly; she with fear and mingled horror.

"These—these visitors." The words came almost in a whisper.

"Yes."

"And what were they like?"

The girl spoke apprehensively.

Then Tresler told his story as he had told it to Joe Nelson. And Diane hung on every word he uttered, searching him through and through with her troubled eyes.

"What are you going to do about it?" she asked as he finished.

Tresler was struck with the peculiarity of the question. She expressed no surprise, no wonder. It seemed as though the matter was in nowise new to her. Her whole solicitude was in her anticipation of what he would do about it.

"I am not sure," he said, concealing his surprise under a leisurely manner. "I had intended to tell Jake," he went on a moment later, "only the Lady Jezebel put it out of my head. I told Joe Nelson last night. He told me I had seen Red Mask, the cattle thief, and one of his men. He also

tried to get me to promise that I would say nothing about it to Jake. I refused to give that promise. He gave me no sufficient reasons, you see, and—well, I failed to see the necessity for silence.”

“But there is a necessity, Mr. Tresler. The greatest.” Diane’s tone was thrilling with an almost fierce earnestness. “Joe was right. Jake is the last person to whom you should tell your story.”

“Why?”

“Why?” Diane echoed, with a mirthless laugh. “Pshaw!”

“Yes, why? I have a right to know, Miss Marbolt.”

“You shall know all I can tell you.” The girl seemed on the verge of making an impulsive statement, but suddenly stopped; and when at last she did proceed her tone was more calm and so low as to be little above a whisper. “Visitors such as you have seen have been seen by others before. The story, as you have told it, has in each case been told to Jake by the unfortunate who witnessed these strange movements at night——”

“Unfortunate?”

“Yes. The informant has always met with misfortune, accident—whatever you like to call it. Listen; it is a long story, but I will merely outline the details I wish to impress on you. Some years ago this Red Mask appeared from no one knows where. Curiously enough his appearance was in the vicinity of this ranch. We were robbed, and he vanished. Some time later he was seen again, much the same as you saw him last night. One of our boys gave the warning to Jake. Two days later the poor fellow who informed upon him was found shot on the trail into Forks. Later, again, another hand witnessed a somewhat similar scene and gave information. His end was by drowning in a shallow part of the river. Folks attributed his end to drink, but—— Again Red Mask showed up—always at night—again he was seen, and Jake was warned. The victim this time met his death by the falling of a rock in the foothills. The rock killed horse and rider.

And so it has gone on at varying intervals. Eight men have been similarly treated. The ninth, Arizona, barely escaped with his life a little while ago. I've no doubt but that some accident will happen to him yet. And, mark this, in each case the warning has gone first to Jake. I may be altogether wrong; certainly other folks do not look upon the death of these various men with suspicion, but I have watched, and reasoned out all I have seen. And——”

“Why, Jake must——”

“Hush!”

Diane gazed around her apprehensively.

“No, no, Mr. Tresler,” she went on hurriedly, “I do not say that; I dare not think of it. Jake has been with us so long; he cares for father's interest as for his own. In spite of his terrible nature he is father's—friend.”

“And the man who intends to marry you,” Tresler added to himself. Aloud he asked, “Then how do you account for it?”

“That's just it. I—I don't account for it. I only warn you not to take your story to Jake.”

Tresler drew a step nearer, and stood so close to her that her dungaree skirt was almost touching him. He looked up in a manner that compelled her gaze.

“You do account for it, Miss Marbolt,” he said emphatically.

Nor did the girl attempt denial. Just for a moment there was a breathless silence. Then Bessie pawed the ground, and thrust her nose into the face of Tresler's horse in friendly, caressing fashion; and the movement broke the spell.

“Urge me no further, Mr. Tresler,” Diane exclaimed appealingly. “Do not make me say something I have no right to say; something I might have cause to regret all my life. Believe me, I hardly know what to believe, and what not to believe; I hardly know what to think. I can only speak as my instinct guides me. Oh, Mr. Tresler, I—I can trust you. Yes—I know I can.”

The girl's appeal had its effect. Tresler reached up and caught the little outstretched hands.

"Yes, you can trust me, Miss Marbolt," he said with infinite kindness. "You have done the very best thing you could have done. You have given me your confidence—a trouble that I can see has caused you ages of unhappiness. I confess you have opened up suspicions that seem almost preposterous, but you——" He broke off, and stood gazing down thoughtfully at the two hands he still held clasped within his. Then he seemed to become suddenly aware of the position, and, with a slight laugh, released them. "Pardon me," he said, glancing up into the troubled eyes with a kindly smile. "I was dreaming. Come, let us return to the ranch. It is time. It will be pleasant riding in the cool. By Jove, I begin to think that it is more than possible I owe Jake considerable gratitude after all."

"You owe him nothing," answered Diane, with angry emphasis. "You owe him nothing but obedience as a ranch hand, and that you will have to pay him. For the rest, avoid him as you would a pest."

Tresler sprang into the saddle, and the horses ambled leisurely off in the direction of the ranch. And, as he rode, he set aside all thoughts of Jake and of Red Mask. He thought only of the girl herself, of her delightful companionship.

His steady-going horse, with due regard for the sex of his companion, allowed Bess to lead him by a neck. He travelled amiably by her side, every now and then raising his nose as though to bite his spirited little companion, but it was only pretence. Nor did Tresler urge him faster. He preferred that they should travel thus. He could gaze to his heart's content upon Diane without displaying rudeness. He could watch the trim, erect figure, poised so easily and gracefully upon the saddle. She rode like one born to the saddle, and, by the gait of her mare, he could see that her hands were of the lightest, yet firm and convincing to the high-mettled animal they controlled.

The girl was a perfect picture as she rode ; her rich, dark hair was loosely coiled, and several waving ringlets had fluffed loose with the breeze and motion of riding, and strayed from the shadow of her wide hat. Tresler's thoughts went back to his Cornish home ; and, he told himself, none of the horsewomen he had known could have displayed such an abundant grace in the saddle with their rigid habits and smart hats. There was nothing of the riding school here ; just the horsemanship that is so much a natural instinct.

And so they rode on to the ranch.

CHAPTER VI

THE KILLING OF MANSON ORR

ALL was still and drowsy about the ranch. Every available hand was out at work upon some set task, part of the daily routine of the cattle world. Mosquito Bend was a splendid example of discipline, for Jake was never the man to let his men remain idle. Even Arizona had been set to herd the milch cows and generally tend the horses remaining in the barn; and Tresler, too, was further acquainting himself with the cantankerous nature of barbed-wire fencing.

On this particular afternoon there was nothing about the ranch to indicate the undercurrent of trouble Tresler had so quickly discovered to be flowing beneath its calm surface. The sun was pouring down upon the wilting foliage with a fierceness which had set the insect world droning its drowsy melody; the earth was already parching; the sloughs were already dry, and the tall grass therein was rapidly ripening against the season of haying. But in spite of the seeming peace; in spite of the cloudless sky, the pastoral beauty of the scene, the almost inaudible murmur of the distant river, the tide was flowing swiftly and surely. It was leaping with the roar of a torrent.

A clatter of horse's hoofs broke up the quiet, and came rattling over the river trail. The noise reached Jake's ears and set him alert. He recognized the eager haste, the terrific speed, of the animal approaching. He rose from his bunk and stood ready, and a look of deep interest was in his bold

black eyes. Suddenly a horseman came into view. He was leaning well over his horse's neck, urging to a race with whip and spur. Jake saw him sweep by and breast the rise to the rancher's house.

At the verandah the man flung off his horse, and left the drooping beast standing while he hammered at the door. There was some delay, and he repeated his summons still more forcibly, adding his voice to his demand.

"Hello there!" he called. "Any one in?"

"Archie Orr," Jake muttered to himself, as he stepped out of his hut.

The next moment the man at the verandah was caught up in the full blast of the foreman's half-savage and wholly hectoring protest.

"What blazin' racket are you raisin' ther'?" he roared, charging up the hill with heavy, hurried strides. "This ain't Skitter Reach, you dog-gone coyote, nor ain't that your pap's shanty. What's itchin' you, blast you?"

Archie swung round at the first shout. There was a wild expression on his somewhat weak face. It was the face of a weak nature suddenly worked up into the last pitch of frenzy. But even so the approach of Jake was not without its effect. His very presence was full of threat to the weaker man. Archie was no physical coward, but, in that first moment of meeting, he felt as if he had been suddenly taken by the collar, lifted up and shaken, and forcibly set down on his feet again. And his reply came in a tone that voiced the mental process he had passed through.

"I've come for help. I was in Forks last night, and only got home this afternoon," he answered, with unnatural calmness. Then the check gave way before his hysterical condition, and Jake's momentary influence was lost upon him. "I tell you it's Red Mask! It's him and his gang! They've shot my father down; they've burned us out, and driven off our stock! God's curse on the man! But I'll have him. I'll hunt him down. Ha! ha!" The young man's blue

eyes flashed and his face worked as his hysteria rose and threatened to overwhelm him. "You hear?" he shouted on—"what does it say? Blood for blood. I'll have it! Give me some help. Give me horses, and I'll have it! I'll——" His voice had risen to a shriek.

"You'll shut off that damned noise, or"—Jake's ferocious face was thrust forward, and his fierce eyes glared furiously into the other's—"or git."

Archie shrank back and silenced at once. The effect suited the foreman, and he went on with a sardonic leer—

"An' you'll have 'blood for blood' o' Red Mask? You? You who was away boozin' in Forks when you'd a right to ha' been around lookin' to see that old skinflint of a father o' yours didn't git no hurt. You're goin' to round up Red Mask; you who ain't got guts enough but to crawl round here fer help to do it. You!"

A hot reply sprang to the youngster's lips in spite of his fear of this man, but it died suddenly as a voice from within the doorway broke in upon them.

"And a right purpose too, Archie."

Diane stepped out on to the verandah and ranged herself at his side, while her scornful brown eyes sought the foreman's face. There was a moment's pause, then she looked up into the boy's troubled face.

"You want to see my father?"

Archie was only eighteen, and though well grown and muscular, he was still only a boy.

"Yes, Miss Diane; I do want to see him. I want to borrow a couple of horses from him, and to ask his advice."

Archie's recent heat and hysteria had soothed under the influence of the girl's presence. He now stood bowed and dejected; he appeared to have suddenly grown old. Jake watched the scene with a sneer on his brutal face, but remained silent now that Diane was present.

"I will rouse him myself," she said quietly, moving towards the door. "Yes, you shall see him, Archie. I heard what

you said just now, and I'll tell him. But——" She broke off, hesitating. Then she came back to him. "Is—is your father dead, or—only wounded?"

The boy's head drooped forward, and two great tears rolled slowly down his cheeks. Diane turned away, and a far-off look came into her steady brown eyes. There was a silence for a moment, then a deep, heart-broken sob came from the lad at her side. She flashed one hard glance in Jake's direction and turned to her companion, gently gripping his arm in a manner that expressed a world of womanly sympathy. Her touch, her quiet, strong helpfulness, did more for him than any formal words of condolence could have done. He lifted his head and dashed the tears from his face; and the girl smiled encouragement upon him.

"Wait here," she said; "I will go and fetch father."

She slipped away, leaving the two men alone. And when she had gone, the foreman's raucous voice sounded harshly on the still air.

"Say, you ain't smart, neither. We got one of your kidney around here now. Kind o' reckons to fix the old man through the girl. Most weak-kneed fellers gamble a pile on petticoats. Wal, I guess you're right out. Marbolt ain't easy that way. You'll be sorry you fetched him from his bed, or I don't know him."

Archie made no reply. Nor was any more talk possible, for, at that moment, there came the steady tap, tap, of the blind man's stick down the passage, and the two men faced the door expectantly. The rancher shuffled out on to the verandah. Diane was at his side, and led him straight over to young Orr. The old man's head was poised alertly for a second; then he turned swiftly in the foreman's direction.

"Hah! that you, Jake?" He nodded as he spoke, and then turned back to the other. The blind man's instinct seemed something more than human.

"Eh? Your father murdered, boy?" Marbolt questioned, without the least softening of tone. "Murdered?"

Archie gulped down his rising emotion. But there was no life in his answer—his words came in a tone of utter hopelessness.

"Yes, sir; shot down, I gather, in defence of our home stead."

The steady stare of the rancher's red eyes was hard to support. Archie felt himself weaken before the personality of this man he had come to see.

"Gather?"

The hardness of his greeting had now changed to the gentleness of tone in which the blind man usually spoke. But the boy drew no confidence from it while confronted by those unseeing eyes. It was Diane who understood and replied for him.

"Yes; Archie was in Forks last night, on business, father. He only learned what had happened on returning home this afternoon. He—he wants some help."

"Yes, sir," Archie went on quickly; "only a little help. I came home to find our homestead burned clean out. Not a roof left to shelter my mother and sister, and not one living beast left upon the place, except the dogs. Oh, my God, it is awful! Mother and Alice were sitting beside the corral gate weeping fit to break their hearts over the dead body of father when I found them. And the story, as I learned it, sir, was simple—horribly, terribly simple. They were roused at about two in the morning by the dogs barking. Father, thinking timber wolves were around, went out with a gun. He saw nothing till he got to the corrals. Then mother, watching from her window, saw the flash of several guns, and heard the rattle of their reports. Father dropped. Then the gang of murderers roused out the stock, and some drove it off, while others wantonly fired the buildings. It was Red Mask, sir, for he came up to the house and ordered mother out before the place was fired. She is sure it was him because of his mask. She begged him not to burn her home, but the devil had no remorse; he vouchsafed only one reply. Maybe she forced

him to an answer with her appeal; maybe he only spoke to intimidate others who might hear of his words from her. Anyway, he said, 'Your man and you open your mouths too wide around this place. Manson Orr wrote in to the police, and asked for protection. You won't need it now, neither will he.' " He paused, while the horror of his story sank deeply into the heart of at least one of his hearers. Then he went on with that eager, nervous fire he had at first displayed: "Mr. Marbolt, I look to you to help me. I've got nothing to keep me now from following this devil of a man. I want to borrow horses, and I'll hunt him down. I'll hunt him down while I've a breath left in my body, sir," he went on, with rising passion. "I'll pay him if it takes me my lifetime! Only lend me the horses, sir. It is as much to your interest as mine, for he has robbed you before now; your property is no more safe than any other man's. Let us combine to fight him, to bring him down, to measure him his full measure, to send him to hell, where he belongs. I'll do this——"

"Yes, while your mother and sister starve," put in the blind man, drily. Then, as the fire of Archie's passion suddenly sank at the cold, incisive words, and he remained silent and abashed, he went on, in quiet, even tones, while his red eyes were focussed upon his visitor's face with disconcerting directness, "No, no; go you—I won't say 'home,' but go you to your mother and sister: look after them, care for them, work for them. You owe that to them before any act of vengeance be made. When you have achieved their comfort, you are at liberty to plunge into any rashness you choose. I am no youngster, Archie Orr, I am a man of years, who has seen, all my life, only through a brain rendered doubly acute by lack of sight, and my advice is worthy of your consideration. You have nothing more to fear from Red Mask at present, but if you continue your headlong course you will have; and, as far as I can make out, his hand is heavy and swift in falling. Go back to your women-folk, I say. You

can get no horses from me for such a foolhardy purpose as you meditate."

Diane had watched her father closely, and as he finished speaking, she moved towards the bereaved man and laid a hand upon his arm in gentle appeal.

"Father is right, Archie. Go back to them, those two lonely, broken-hearted women. You can do all for them if you will. They need all that your kind, honest heart can bestow. It is now that you must show the stuff you are made of."

Archie had turned away; but he looked round and mechanically glanced down at the brown hand still resting upon his arm. The sight of it held him for some moments, and when he raised his head a new look was in his eyes. The sympathy in her tones, the gentle encouragement of the few words she had spoken, had completed that which the sound but unsympathetic advice of her father had begun.

His purpose had been the wild impulse of unstable youth; there was no strength to it, no real resolution. Besides, he was a gentle-hearted lad, to whom Diane's appeal for his mother and sister was irresistible.

"Thank you, Miss Diane," he said, with a profound sigh. "Your kind heart has seen where my anger has been blind. Yes, I will return and help my mother. And I thank you, sir," he went on, turning reluctantly to face the stare of the rancher's eyes again. "You, too, have plainly shown me my duty, and I shall follow it, but—if ever——"

"And you'll do well," broke in Jake, with a rough laugh that jarred terribly. "Your father's paid his pound. If his son's wise, he'll hunt his hole."

Archie's eyes flashed ominously. Diane saw the look, and, in an instant, drew his attention to his horse, which was moving off towards the barn.

"See, Archie," she said, with a gentle smile, "your horse is weary, and is looking for rest."

The boy read her meaning. He held out his hand

impulsively, and the girl placed hers into it. In a moment his other had closed over it, and he shook it tenderly. Then, without a word, he made off after his horse.

The blind man's face was turned in his direction as he went, and when the sound of his footsteps had died away, he turned abruptly and tapped his way back to the door. At the threshold he turned upon the foreman.

"Two days in succession I have been disturbed," he gritted out. "You are getting past your work, Jake Harnach."

"Father——" Diane started forward in alarm, but he cut her short.

"And as for you, miss, remember your place in my house. Go, look to your duties. Sweep, wash, cook, sew. Those are the things your sex is made for. What interest have you, dare you have, in that brainless boy? Let him fight his own battles. It may make a man of him; though I doubt it. He is nothing to you."

Diane shrank before the scathing blast of that sightless fury. But she rallied to protest.

"It is the women-folk, father."

"Women-folk? Bah!"

He threw up his hands in ineffable scorn, and shuffled away into the house.

Jake, still smarting under the attack, stood leaning against the verandah post. He was looking away down at the bunk-house, where a group of the men were gathered about Archie Orr, who, seated on his horse, was evidently telling his tale afresh.

Diane approached him. He did not even turn to meet her.

"Jake, I want Bess at once. Hitch her to the buckboard, and have her sent round to the kitchen door."

"What are you goin' to do, my girl?" he asked, without shifting his gaze.

"Maybe I shall drive over to see those poor women."

"Maybe?"

"Yes."

"You can't have her."

Jake turned, and looked down at her from his great height. Archie Orr had just ridden off.

Diane returned his look fearlessly, and there was something in the directness of her gaze that made the giant look away.

"I think I can," she said quietly. "Go and see to it now."

The man started. It seemed as if he were about to bluster. His bold, black eyes flashed ominously, and it was plain from his attitude that a flat and harsh refusal was on his lips. But somehow he didn't say it. The brutality of his expression slowly changed as he looked at her. A gentle light stole slowly, and it seemed with difficulty, into his eyes, where it looked as out of place as the love-light in the eyes of a tiger. But there was no mistaking it. However incongruous it was there, and the lips that had been framing a cruel retort merely gave utterance to a quiet acquiescence.

"All right. I'll send her round in five minutes."

And Diane went into the house at once.

Meanwhile, a great discussion of young Orr's affairs was going on at the bunkhouse. Arizona had vacated his favourite seat, and was now holding the floor. His pale face was flushed with a hectic glow of excitement. He was taxing his little stock of strength to the uttermost, and, at least, some of those looking on listening to him knew it.

"I tell you ther' ain't nothin' fer it but to roll up to old blind hulks an' ast him to send us out. Ef this dog-gone skunk's let be, ther' ain't no stock safe. Guess, I've had my med'cine from 'em, an' I'm jest crazy fer more. I've had to do wi' fellers o' their kidney 'fore, I guess. We strung six of 'em up in a day on the same tree down Arizona way, as that grey-headed possum, Joe Nelson, well remembers. Say, we jest cleaned our part o' that country right quick. Guess ther' wa'an't a 'bad man' wuth two plugs o' nickel chewin' around

when we'd finished gettin' 'em. Say, this feller's played it long enough, an' I'm goin' right now to see the boss. He's around. Who's comin'?"

"Yes, an' Archie Orr's a pore sort o' crittur to git left wi' two women-folk," said Raw Harris, rising from his up-turned bucket and putting forth his argument, regardless of its irrelevance. "Not a stick to shelter him—which I mean 'them.' An' not a dog-gone cent among 'em. By G——, Arizona's right."

"That's it," put in Joe Nelson; "you've hit it. Not a dog-gone cent among 'em, an', what's more, owin' blind hulks a whole heap o' bills on mortgage. Say, that was mostly a weak move him askin' the boss fer help. Why, I guess old Marbolt hates hisself o'ny one shade wuss'n he hated Manson Orr. Say, boys, ef we're askin' to lynch Red Mask, we ain't askin' in any fancy name like 'Orr.' Savee?"

There was silence for a moment while they digested the wisdom of the suggestion. Then Jacob Smith nodded, and Law Cawley murmured—

"Dead gut every time, is Joe."

This loosened their tongues again until Tresler spoke.

"See here, boys, you're talking of lynching, and haven't a notion of how you're going to get your man. Don't even know where to lay hands on him. Do you think Marbolt's going to turn us all loose on the warpath? Not he. And how are two or three of us going to get a gang of ten or twelve? Besides, I believe it'll be easier to get him without a lynching party. Remember he's no ordinary cattle-rustler. I say lie low, he'll come our way, and then——"

"That's it, lie low," broke in Joe Nelson, shaking his grey head over a pannikin of tea, and softly blowing a clearing among the dead flies floating on its surface. "Maybe, y' ain't heard as the p'lice ha' come around Forks. Guess they've fixed a station ther'."

"They've already done so?" asked Tresler.

"Yup."

"By Jove! The very thing, boys. Don't roll up. Don't do any lynching. The red-coats are the boys for Red Mask."

But, Arizona, backed by Raw Harris, would have none of it. They were of the old-time stock who understood only old-time methods, and cordially resented any peaceful solution to the difficulty. They wanted a lynching, and no argument would dissuade them. And after much discussion it was Arizona's final word that carried the day.

"Now, you see, Tresler," he said huskily, for his voice was tired with sustained effort. "You're the remarkablest smart 'tenderfoot' that ever I see. Say, you're a right smart daddy—an' I ain't given to latherin' soap-suds neither. But ther's suthin's I calc'late that no 'tenderfoot,' smart as he may be, is goin' to locate right. Hoss-thieves is hoss-thieves, an' needs stringin'. Ther' ain't nuthin' for it but a raw-hide rope fer them fellers. Guess I've seen more'n you've heerd tell of. Say, boys, who's goin' to see the boss? Guess he's right ther' on the verandah."

Though there was no verbal reply as the wild American turned to move off, there was a general movement to follow him. Raw Harris started it. Pannikins were set down upon the ground, and, to a man, the rest followed in their leader's wake. Tresler went too, but he went only because he knew it would be useless—even dangerous—to hold back. The general inclination was to follow the lead of this volcanic man. Besides, he had only voiced that which appealed to them all. The gospel of restraint was not in their natures. Only Joe Nelson really endorsed Tresler's opinion. But then Joe was a man who had lived his youth out, and had acquired that level-headedness from experience which Tresler possessed instinctively. Besides, he was in touch with Diane. He had lived more than ten years on that ranch, during which time he had stood by watching with keenly observant eyes the doings of the cattle world about him. But he, too, in spite of his own good reason, moved on to the verandah with the rest.

And Jake saw the movement and understood, and he

reached the verandah first and warned the blind man of their coming.

And Tresler's prophecy was more than fulfilled. As they came they saw the rancher rise from his seat. He faced them, a tall, awesome figure in his long, full dressing-gown. His large, clean-cut head, his grey, clipped beard, the long aquiline nose, and, overshadowing all, his staring, red eyes; even on Arizona he had a damping effect.

"Well?" he questioned, as the men halted before him. Then, as no answer was forthcoming, he repeated his inquiry. "Well?"

And Arizona stepped to the front. "Wal, boss, it's this a-ways," he began. "These rustlers, I guess——"

But the blind man cut him short. The frowning brows drew closer over the sightless eyes, which were focussed upon the cowpuncher with a concentration more overpowering than if their vision had been unimpaired.

"Eh? So you've been listening to young Orr," he said, with a quietness in marked contrast to the expression of his face. "And you want to get after them?" Then he shook his head, and the curious depression of his brows relaxed, and a smile hovered round his mouth. "No, no, boys; it's useless coming to me. Worse than useless. You, Arizona, should know better. There are not enough ranches around here to form a lynching party, if one were advisable. And I can't spare men from here. Why, to send enough men from here to deal with this gang would leave my place at their mercy. Tut, tut, it is impossible. You must see it yourselves."

"But you've been robbed before, sir," Arizona broke out in protest.

"Yes, yes." There was a grating of impatience in the blind man's voice, and the smile had vanished. "And I prefer to be robbed of a few beeves again rather than run the chance of being burned out by those scoundrels. I'll have no argument about the matter. I can spare no hand among

you. I'll not police this district for anybody. You understand—for anybody. I will not stop you—any of you"—his words came with a subtle fierceness now, and were directed at Arizona—"but of this I assure you, any man who leaves this ranch to set out on any wild goose chase after these rustlers leaves it for good. That's all I have to say."

Arizona was about to retort hotly, but Tresler, who was standing close up to him, plucked at his shirt-sleeve, and, strangely enough, his interference had its effect. The man glared round, but when he saw who it was that had interrupted him, he made no further effort to speak. The wild man of the prairie was feeling the influence of a stronger, or, at least, a steadier nature than his own. And Jake's lynx eyes watching saw the movement, and he understood.

The men moved reluctantly away. Their moody looks and slouching gait loudly voiced their feelings. No words passed between them until they were well out of earshot. And Tresler realized now the wonderful power of brain behind the sightless eyes of the rancher. Now, he understood something of the strength which had fought the battle, sightless though he was, of those early days; now he comprehended the man who could employ a man of Jake's character, and have strength enough to control him. That afternoon's exhibition made a profound impression on him.

Their supper was finished before they set out for the house, and now the men, murmuring, discontented, and filled with resentment against the rancher, loafed idly around the bunkhouse. They smoked and chewed and discussed the matter as angry men who are thwarted in their plans will ever do. Tresler and Joe alone remained quiet. Tresler, for the reason that a definite plan was gradually forming in his brain out of the chaos of events, and Joe because he was watching the other for his own obscure reasons.

The sun had set when Tresler separated himself from his companions. Making his way down past the lower corrals he took himself to the ford. Joe thoughtfully watched him go.

Seated on a fallen tree-trunk Tresler pondered long and deeply. He was thinking of Joe's information that the police had at last set up a station at Forks. Why should he not carry his story to them? Why should he not take their leader into his confidence, and so work out the trapping of this gang? And, if Jake were——

He had no time to proceed further. His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of wheels, followed, a moment later, by the splash of a horse crossing the ford. He turned in the direction whence the sound came, and beheld Bessie hauling a buckboard up the bank of the river; at the same instant he recognized the only occupant of the vehicle. It was Diane returning from her errand of mercy.

Tresler sprang to his feet. He doffed his prairie hat as the buckboard drew abreast of him. Nor was he unmindful of the sudden flush that surged to the girl's cheeks as she recognized him. Without any intention Diane checked the mare, and, a moment later, realizing what she had done, she urged her on with unnecessary energy. But Tresler had no desire that she should pass him in that casual fashion, and, with a disarming smile, hailed her.

"Don't change a good mind, Miss Marbolt," he cried.

Whereat the blush returned to the girl's cheeks intensified, for she knew that he had seen her intention. This time, however, she pulled up decidedly, and turned a smiling face to him.

"This is better than I bargained for," he went on. "I came here to think the afternoon's events out, and—I meet you. I had no idea you were out."

"I felt that Bess wanted exercise," the girl answered evasively.

Without asking herself why, Diane felt pleased at meeting this man. Their first encounter had been no ordinary one. From the beginning he seemed to link himself with her life. For her their hours of acquaintance might have been years; years of mutual help and confidence. However, she gathered

her reins up as though to drive on. Tresler promptly stayed her.

"No, don't go yet, Miss Marbolt, please. Pleasures that come unexpectedly are pleasures indeed. I feel sure you will not cast me back upon my gloomy thoughts."

Diane let the reins fall into her lap.

"So your thoughts were gloomy; well, I don't wonder at it. There are gloomy things happening. I was out driving, and thought I would look in at Mosquito Reach. It has been razed to the ground."

"You have been to see—and help—young Orr's mother and sister? I know it. It was like you, Miss Marbolt," Tresler said, with a genuine look of admiration at the dark little face so overshadowed by the sun-hat.

"Don't be so ready to credit me with virtues I do not possess. We women are curious. Curiosity is one of our most pronounced features. Poor souls—their home is gone. Utterly—utterly gone. Oh, Mr. Tresler, what are we to do? We cannot remain silent, and yet—we don't know. We can prove nothing."

"And what has become of them—I mean Mrs. Orr and her daughter?" Tresler asked, for the moment ignoring the girl's question.

"They have gone into Forks."

"And food and money?"

"I have seen to that." Diane shrugged her shoulders to make light of what she had done, but Tresler would not be put off.

"Bless you for that," he said, with simple earnestness. "I knew I was right." Then he reverted abruptly to her question. "But we can do something; the police have come to Forks."

"Yes, I know." Diane's tone suddenly became eager, almost hopeful. "And father knows, and he is going to send in a letter to Sergeant Fyles—Fyles is the great prairie detective of the force, and is in charge of Forks—welcoming

him, and inviting him out here. He is going to tell him all he knows of these rustlers, and so endeavour to set him on their track. Father laughs at the idea of the police catching these men. He says that they—the rustlers—are no ordinary gang, but clever men, and well organized. But he thinks that if he gets the police around it will save his property.”

“And your father is wise. Yes, it will certainly have that effect; but I, too, have a little idea that I have been working at, and—Miss Marbolt, forgive the seeming impertinence, but I want to discuss Jake again; this time from a personal point of view. You dislike Jake; more, you have shown me that you fear him.”

The girl hesitated before replying. This man’s almost brusque manner of driving straight to his point was somewhat alarming. He gave her no loophole. If she discussed the matter with him at all it must be fully, or she must refuse to answer him.

“I suppose I do fear him,” she said at last with a sigh. Then her face suddenly lit up with an angry glow. “I fear him as any girl would fear the man who, in defiance of her expressed hatred, thrusts his attentions upon her. I fear him because of father’s blindness. I fear him because he hopes in his secret heart some day to own this ranch, these lands, all these splendid cattle, our fortune. Father will be gone then. How? I don’t know. And I—I shall be Jake’s slave. These are the reasons why I fear Jake, Mr. Tresler, since you insist on knowing.”

“I thank you, Miss Marbolt.” The gentle tone at once dispelled the girl’s resentment. “You have suspicions which may prove to be right. It was for this reason I asked you to discuss Jake. One thing more and I’ll have done. This Joe Nelson, he is very shrewd, he is in close contact with you. How far is he to be trusted?”

“To any length; with your life, Mr. Tresler,” the girl said with enthusiasm. “Joe is nobody’s enemy but his own, poor fellow. I am ashamed to admit it, but I have long since

realized that when things bother me so that I cannot bear them all alone, it is Joe that I look to for help. He is so kind. Oh, Mr. Tresler, you cannot understand the gentleness, the sympathy of his honest old heart. I am very, very fond of Joe."

The man abruptly moved from his stand at the side of the buckboard, and looked along the trail in the direction of the ranch. His action was partly to check an impulse which the girl's manner had roused in him, and partly because his quick ears had caught the sound of some one approaching. He was master of himself in a moment, however, and, returning, smiled up into the serious eyes before him.

"Well, Joe shall help me," he said. "He shall help me as he has helped you. If——" he broke off, listening. Then with great deliberation he came close up to the buckboard. "Miss—Diane," he said, and the girl's lids lowered before the earnestness of his gaze, "you shall never—while I live—be the slave of Jake Harnach."

Nor had Tresler time to move away before a tall figure rounded the bend of the trail. In the dusk he mistook the new-comer for Jake, then, as he saw how slim he was, he realized his mistake.

The man came right up to the buckboard with swift, almost stealthy strides. The dark olive of his complexion, the high cheek-bones, the delicately chiselled, aquiline nose, the perfectly pencilled eyebrows surmounting the quick, keen, handsome black eyes; these things combined with the lithe, sinuous grace of an admirably poised body made him a figure of much attraction.

The man ignored Tresler, and addressed the girl in the buckboard in a tone that made the former's blood boil.

"The boss, him raise hell. Him say, 'I mak' her wish she not been born any more.' Him say, 'Go you, Anton, an' find her, an' you not leave her but bring her back.' Ho, the boss, your father, he mad. Hah?" The half-breed grinned, and displayed a flashing set of teeth. "So I go," he went on,

still smiling in his impudent manner. "I look out. I see the buckboard come down to the river. I know you come. I see from there back"—he pointed away to the bush—"you talk with the Englishman, an' I wait. So!"

Diane was furious. Her gentle brown eyes flashed, and two bright patches of colour burned on her cheeks. The half-breed watched her carelessly. Turning to Tresler she held out her hand abruptly.

"Good-night, Mr. Tresler," she said quietly. Then she chirruped to her light-hearted mare and drove off.

Anton looked after her. "Sacre!" he cried, with a light shrug. "She is so mad—so mad. Voila!" and he leisurely followed in the wake of the buckboard.

And Tresler looked after him. Then it was that the Englishman's thoughts reverted to the scene in the saloon at Forks. So this was Anton—"Black" Anton—the man who had slid into the country without any one knowing it. He remembered Slum Ranks's words and description. This was the man who had the great Jake's measure.

CHAPTER VII

WHICH DEALS WITH THE MATTER OF DRINK

ALTHOUGH the murder of Manson Orr caused a widespread outcry, it ended at that in so far as the inhabitants of the district were concerned. There were one or two individuals who pondered deeply on the matter, and went quietly about a careful investigation, and of these Tresler was the most prominent. He found excuse to visit the scene of the outrage; he took interest in the half-breed settlement six miles out from Mosquito Bend. He hunted among the foothills, even into the obscurer confines of the mountains; and these doings of his were the result of much thought, and the work of much time and ingenuity; for everything had to be done without raising the suspicion of anybody on the ranch, or for that matter, off it. Being a 'green' hand helped him. It was really astonishing how easily an intelligent man like Tresler could get lost; and yet such was the deplorable fact. Even Arizona's opinion of him sank to zero, while Jake found a wide scope for his sneering brutality.

As the days lengthened out into a week, and then a fortnight passed and nothing more was heard of Red Mask, the whole matter began to pass out of mind, and gradually became relegated to the lore of the country. It was added to the already long list of bar-room stories, to be narrated, with embellishments, by such men as Slum or the worthy Forks carpenter.

The only thing that stuck in people's minds, and that only

because it added fuel to an already deep, abiding, personal hatred, was the story of Julian Marbolt's treatment of young Archie Orr, and his refusal to inaugurate a vigilance party. The blind man's name, always one to rouse the roughest side of men's tongues, was now cursed more bitterly than ever.

And during these days the bunkhouse at Mosquito Bend seethed with revolt. But though this was so, underneath all their most bitter reflections the men were not without a faint hope of seeing the career of these desperadoes cut short; and this hope sprang from the knowledge of the coming of the police to Forks. The faith of Arizona and the older hands, in the official capacity for dealing with these people, was a frail thing, but the younger set were less sceptical.

And at last Julian Marbolt's tardy invitation to Sergeant Fyles was despatched. Tresler had watched and waited for the sending of that letter; he had hoped to be the bearer of it himself. It would have given him the opportunity of making this Fyles's acquaintance, which was a matter he desired to accomplish as soon as possible, without drawing public attention to the fact. But in this he was disappointed, for Jake sent Nelson. Nor did he know of the little man's going until he saw him astride of his buckskin "shag-an-appy," with the letter safely bestowed in his wallet.

This was not the only disappointment he experienced during that fortnight. He saw little or nothing of Diane. To Tresler, at least, their meeting at the ford was something more than a recollection. Every tone of the girl's voice, every look, every word she had spoken remained with him, as these things will at the dawn of love. Many times he tried to see her, but failed. Then he learned the meaning of their separation. One day Joe brought him a note from Diane, in which she told him how Black Anton had returned to her father and poured into his only too willing ears, a wilfully garbled story of their meeting at the ford. She told him of her father's anger, and how he had forbidden her to leave the house unattended by at least one of his two police—Anton and Jake.

This letter made its recipient furious, but it also started a secret correspondence between them, Joe Nelson proving himself perfectly willing to act as go-between. And this correspondence was infinitely pleasant to Tresler. He treasured Diane's letters with a jealous care, making no attempt to disguise the truth from himself. He knew that he was falling hopelessly in love—had fallen hopelessly in love.

This was the position when the evening of the day came on which the rancher's invitation to Sergeant Fyles had been despatched. The supper hash had been devoured by healthy men with healthy appetites. Work was practically over, there was nothing more to be done but feed, water, and bed down the horses. And Joe Nelson had not yet returned from Forks; he was at least five hours overdue.

Arizona, practically recovered from his wound, was carefully soaping his saddle, and generally preparing his accoutrements for return to full work on the morrow. He had grown particularly sour and irritable with being kept so long out of the saddle. His volcanic temper had become even more than usually uncertain.

His convalescence threw him a good deal into Tresler's company, and a sort of uncertain friendship had sprung up between them. Arizona at first tolerated the Englishman, protested scathingly at his failures in the craft, and ended by liking him; while the other cordially appreciated the open, boisterous honesty of the American. He was equally ready to do a kindly action, or smite the man hip and thigh who chanced to run foul of him. Tresler often told him that his nationality was a mistake, that instead of being an American he should have been born in Ireland.

Just now the prospect of once more getting to work had put Arizona in high good temper, and he took his comrade's rough chaff good-naturedly, giving as good as he got, and often a little better.

Jacob Smith had been watching him for some time, and a thoughtful grin had quietly taken possession of his features.

"Soapin' yer saddle," he observed at last, as the lean man happened to look up and see the grinning face in the doorway of the bunkhouse. "Guess saddles do git kind o' slippery when you ain't slung a leg over one fer awhile. Say, best soap the knees o' yer pants too, Arizona. Mebbe y'll sit tighter."

"Wal," retorted Arizona, bending to his work again, "I do allow ther's more savee in that tip than most gener'ly slobbers off'n your tongue. I'll kind o' turn it over some."

Jacob's grin broadened. "Guess I should. Your plug ain't been saddled sence you wus sent sick. Soft soap ain't gener'ly in your line; makes yer laff to see you handlin' it."

"That's so," observed the American, imperturbably. "I 'lows it has its uses. 'Tain't bad fer washin'. Guess you ain't tried it any?"

At that moment Raw Harris came across from the barn. He lounged over to an up-turned box and sat down.

"Any o' you fellers seen Joe Nelson along yet?" he asked as he leisurely filled his pipe.

"Five hours overdue," said Tresler, who was cleaning out the chambers of his revolver.

"Joe ain't likely to git back this night," observed Arizona. "He's a terror when he gits alongside a saloon. Guess he's drank out one ranch o' his own down Texas way. He's the all-firedest bag o' tricks I've ever see. Soft as a babby is Joe. Honest? Wal, I'd smile. Joe's that honest he'd give up his socks ef the old sheep came along an' claimed the wool. Him an' me's worked together 'fore. He's gittin' kind o' old, an' ain't as handy as he used to be. Say, he never told you 'bout that temperator feller, Tresler, did he?"

Tresler shook his head, and paused in his work to re-light his pipe.

"It kind o' minds me to tell you sence we're talkin' o' Joe. It likely shows my meanin' when I sez he's that soft an' honest, an' yet crazy fer drink. You see, it wus this a-ways. I wus kind o' foreman o' the 'U bar U's' in Montana, an' Joe wus

punchin' cows then. The boys wus sheer grit ; good hands, mind you, but sudden-like."

Arizona ceased plastering the soap on his saddle and stood erect. His gaunt figure looked leaner than ever, but his face was alight with interest in the story he was about to narrate, and his great wild eyes were shining with a look that suggested a sort of fierce amusement. Teddy Jinks lounged into view and stood propped against an angle of the building.

"Git on," said Lew, between the puffs at his pipe.

Arizona shot a quick, disdainful glance at the powerful figure of the parson's progeny, and went on in his own peculiar fashion—

"Wal, it so happened that the records o' the ' U bar U's ' kind o' got noised abroad some, as they say in the gospel. Them coyotes as reckoned they wus smart 'lowed as even the cattle found a shortage o' liquid by reason of an onnatural thirst on that ranch. Howsum, mebbe ther' wus reason. Old Joe, he wus the daddy o' the lot. Jim Marlin used to say as Joe most gener'ly used a black lead when he writ his letters ; didn't fancy wastin' ink. Mebbe that's kind o' zaggerated, but I guess he wus the next thing to a fact'ry o' blottin' paper, sure.

"Wal, I reckon some bald-faced galoot got yappin', least-ways there wus a temperance outfit come right along an' lay hold o' the boss. Say, flannel-mouthed orators ! I guess that feller could roll out more juicy notions on the subject o' drink in five minutes than a high-pressure locomotive could blow off steam through a five-inch leak in haf a year. He wus an eddication in langwige, sir, sech as 'ud per-suade a wall-eyed mule to do what he didn't want, and wa'an't goin' to do anyways.

"I corralled the boys up in the yard, an' the feller got good an' goin'. He spotted Joe right off ; fixed him wi' his eye an' focussed him dead centre, an' talked right at him. An' Joe wus iled—that iled, so he couldn't keep a straight

trail fer slippin'. Say, speakin' metaphoric, that feller got the drop on pore Joe. He give him a dose o' syllables in the pit o' the stummick that made him curl, then he follered it right up wi' a couple o' slugs o' his choicest, 'fore he could straighten up. Then he sort o' picked him up an' shook him with a power o' langwige, an' sot him down like a spanked kid. Then he clouted him over both lugs with a shower o' words wi' capitals, clumped him over the head wi' a bunch of texts, an' thrashed him wi' a fact'ry o' trac' papers. Say, I guess pore Joe wouldn't 'a' rec'nized the flavour o' whisky from blue pizen when that feller had done; an' we jest looked on, feelin' 'bout as happy as a lot o' old hens worritin' to hatch out a batch o' Easter eggs. Say, pore Joe wus weepin' over his sins, an' I guess we wus all 'most ready to cry. Then the feller up an' sez, 'Fetch out the pernicious sperrit, the nectar o' the devil, the waters o' the Styx, the vile filth as robs homes o' their support, an' drives whole races to perdition!' an' a lot of other big talk. An', say, we fetched! Yes, sir, we fetched like a lot o' silly, skippin' lambs. We brought out six bottles o' the worstest rotgut ever faked in a settlement saloon, an' handed it over. After that I guess we wus feelin' better. Sez we, feelin' kind o' mumsy over the whole racket, it ain't right, we sez, to harbour no sperrit-soaked, liver-pickled tag of a decent citizen's life around this lay-out; an' so we took Joe Nelson to the river and diluted him. After that I 'lows we lay low. I did hear as some o' the boys said their prayers that night, which goes to show as they wus feelin' kind o' thin an' mean. Ther' wa'an't a feller ther' but wus dead swore off fer a week.

"Guess it wus most the middle o' the night when Jim Yard comes to my shack an' fetched me out. He told me there wus a racket goin' on in the settlement. That tempe-rator wus down ther' blazin' drunk an' shootin' up the town. Say, I felt kind o' hot at that. Yup, pretty sulphury an' hot, an' I went right out, quiet like, and fetched the boys. Them as 'ad said their prayers wus the first to join me. Wal, we

went along an' did things with that.—Ah, guess Jake's comin' this way ; likely he wants somethin'."

Arizona turned abruptly to his saddle again, while all eyes looked over at the approaching foreman. Jake strode up. Arizona took no notice of him. It was his way of showing his dislike for the man. Jake permitted one glance—nor was it a friendly one—in his direction, then he went straight over to where Tresler was sitting.

"Get that mare of yours saddled, Tresler," he said, "and ride into Forks. You'll fetch out that skulkin' coyote, Joe Nelson. You'll fetch him out, savvy? Maybe he's at the saloon—sure he's drunk, anyway. An' if he ain't handed over that letter to the p'lice sergeant, you'll see to it. Say, you'd best shake him up some ; don't be too easy."

"I'll bring him out," replied Tresler, quietly.

"Hah, kind o' squeamish," sneered Jake.

"No. I'm not knocking drunken men about. That's all."

"Wal, see and bring him out," snarled the giant. "I'll see to the rest."

Tresler went off to the barn without another word. His going was almost precipitate, but not from any fear of Jake. It was himself he feared. This merciless brute drove him to distraction every time he came into contact with him, and the only way he found it possible to keep the peace with him at all was by avoiding him, by getting out of his way, by shutting him out of mind whenever it was possible.

In a few minutes he had set out. His uneasy mare was still only half tamed, and very fresh. She left the yards peaceably enough, but jibbed at the river ford. The inevitable thrashing followed, Tresler knowing far too much by now to spare her. Just for one moment she seemed inclined to submit and behave herself, and take to the water kindly. Then her native cussedness asserted itself ; she shook her head angrily, and caught the bar of the spade-bit in her great strong teeth, swung round, and, stretching her long ewe neck,

headed south across country as hard as she could lay heels to the ground.

Tresler fought her every foot of the way, but it was useless. The devil possessed her, and she worked her will on him. By the time he should have reached Forks he was ten miles in the opposite direction.

However, he was not the man to take such a display too kindly, and, having at length regained control, he turned her back and pressed her to make up time. And it made him smile, as he rode, to feel the swing of the creature's powerful strides under him. He could not punish her by asking for pace, and he knew it. She seemed to revel in a rapid journey, and the extra run taken on her own account only seemed to have warned her up to even greater efforts.

It was nearly ten o'clock when he drew near Forks; and the moon had only just risen. The mare was docile enough now, and raced along with her ears pricked and her whole fiery disposition alert.

The trail approached Forks from the west. That is to say, it took a big bend and entered on the western side. Already Tresler could see the houses beyond the trees silhouetted in the moonlight, but the nearer approach was bathed in shadow. The trail came down from a rising ground, cutting its way through the bush, and, passing the lights of the saloon, went on to the market-place.

He checked the mare's impetuosity as he came down the slope. She was too valuable for him to risk her legs. With all her vices, he knew there was not a horse on the ranch that could stand beside the Lady Jezebel on the trail.

She propped jerkily as she descended the hill. Every little rustle of the lank grass startled her, and gave her excuse for frivolity. Her rider was forced to keep a watchful eye and a close seat. A shadowy kit fox worried her with its stealthy movements. It kept pace with her in its silent, ghostly way, now invisible in the long grass, now in full view beside the trail; but always abreast.

Half-way down the trail both horse and rider were startled seriously. A riderless horse, saddled and bridled, dashed out of the darkness and galloped across them. Of her own accord Lady Jezebel swung round, and, before Tresler could check her, had set off in hot pursuit. For once horse and rider were of the same mind, and Tresler bent low in the saddle, ready to grab at the bridle when his mare should overhaul the stranger.

In less than a minute they were abreast of their quarry. The stranger's reins were hanging broken from the bit, and Tresler grabbed them. Nor could he help a quiet laugh, when, on pulling up, he recognized the buckskin pony and quaint old stock saddle of Joe Nelson. And he at once became alive to the necessity of his journey. What, he wondered, had happened to the little choreman?

Leading the captive, he rode back to the trail and pushed on towards the village. But his adventures were not over yet. At the bottom of the hill the mare, brought up to a stand, reared and shied violently. Then she stood trembling like an aspen, seizing every opportunity to edge from the trail, and all the while staring with wild, dilated eyes away out towards the bush on the right front. Her rider followed the direction of her gaze to ascertain the cause of the trouble. For some minutes he could distinguish nothing unusual in the darkness. The moon had not as yet attained much power, and gave him very little assistance; but, realizing the wonderful acuteness of a horse's vision, he decided that there nevertheless was something to be investigated. So he dismounted, and adopting the common prairie method of scanning the skyline, he dropped to the ground.

For some time his search was quite vain, and only the mare's nervous state encouraged him. Then at length, low down in the deep shadow of the bush, something caught and held his attention. Something was moving down there.

He lay quite still, watching intently. Something of the mare's nervous excitement gripped him. The movement was

ghostly. It was only a movement. There was nothing distinct to be seen, nothing tangible; just a weird, nameless something. A dozen times he asked himself what it was. But the darkness always baffled him, and he could find no answer. He had an impression of great flapping wings—such wings as might belong to a giant bat. The movement was sufficiently regular to suggest this, but the idea carried no conviction. There, however, his conjectures ended.

At last he sprang up with a sharp ejaculation, and his hand went to his revolver. The thing, or creature, whatever it was, was coming slowly but steadily towards him. Had he not been sure of this, the attitude of the horses would have settled the question for him. Lady Jezebel pulled back in the throes of a wild fear, and the buckskin plunged madly to get free.

He had hardly persuaded them to a temporary calmness, when a mournful cry, rising in a wailing crescendo, split the air and died away abruptly. And he knew that it came from the advancing "movement."

And now it left the shadow and drew out into the moonlight. And the man watching beheld a dark heap distinctly outlined midway towards the bush. The wings seemed to have folded themselves, or, at least, to have lowered, and were trailing on the ground in the creature's wake. Presently the whole thing ceased to move, and sat still like a great loathsome toad—a silent, uncanny heap amidst the lank prairie grass. And somehow he felt glad that it was no longer approaching.

The moments crept by, and the position remained unchanged. Then slowly, with an air of settled purpose, the creature raised itself on its hind legs, and, swaying and shuffling, continued its advance. In an instant Tresler's revolver leapt from its holster, and he was ready to defend himself. The attitude was familiar to him. He had read stories of the bears in the Rockies, and they came home to him now as he saw his adversary rear itself to its full height,

His puzzlement was over ; he understood now. He was dealing with a large specimen of the Rock Mountain grizzly.

Yes, there could be no mistaking the swaying gait, the curious, snorting breathing, the sadly lolling head and slow movements. He remembered each detail with an exactness which astonished him, and was thrilled with the bristling sensation which assails every hunter when face to face with big game for the first time in his life.

He raised his gun and took a long, steady aim, measuring the distance with deliberation, and selecting the animal's breast for his shot. Then, just as he was about to fire, the brute's head turned and caught the cold, sharp moonlight full upon its face. There was a momentary flash of white, and Tresler's gun was lowered as though it had been struck down.

CHAPTER VIII

JOE NELSON INDULGES IN A LITTLE MATCH-MAKING

THE moonlight had revealed the grotesque features of Joe Nelson!

Tresler returned his gun to its holster precipitately, and his action had in it all the chagrin of a man who has been "had" by a practical joker. His discomfiture, however, quickly gave way before the humour of the situation, and he burst out into a roar of laughter.

He laughed while he watched his bear drop again on to his hands and knees, and continue to crawl towards him, till the tears rolled down his cheeks. On came the little fellow, enveloped in the full embracing folds of a large brown blanket and his silent dogged progress warned Tresler that, as yet, his own presence was either unrealized or ignored in the earnestness of his unswerving purpose. And the nature of that purpose—for Tresler had fully realized it—was the most laughable thing of all. Joe was stalking his buckskin pony with the senseless cunning of a drunken man.

At last the absurdity of the position became too much, and he hailed the little choreman in the midst of his laughter.

"Ho! You, Joe!" he called. "What the blazes d'you think you're doing?"

There was no reply. For all heed the man under the blanket gave, he might have been deaf, dumb and blind. He just came steadily on.

Tresler shouted again, and more sharply. This time his

summons had its effect. It brought an answer; an answer that set him off into a fresh burst of laughter.

"Gorl darn it, boys," came a peevish voice, from amidst the blanket, "'tain't smart, neither, playin' around when a feller's kind o' roundin' up his plug. How 'm I goin' to cut that all-fired buckskin out o' the bunch wi' you gawkin' around like a reg'ment o' hoboes. Ef you don't reckon to fool any, why, some o' you git around an' head him off from the rest o' 'em. I'd do it myself on'y my cussed legs has given out."

"Boys, eh?" Tresler was still laughing, but he checked his mirth sufficiently to answer. "Why, man, it's the whisky that's fooling you. There are no 'boys,' and no 'bunch' of horses here. Just your horse and mine; and I've got them both safe enough. You're drunk, Joe—beastly drunk."

Joe suddenly struggled to his feet and stood swaying uncertainly, but trying hard to steady himself. He focussed his eyes with much effort upon the tall Englishman, and then suddenly moved forward like a man crossing a brook on a single, narrow, and dangerously swaying plank. He all but pitched headlong into the waiting man as he reached him, and would undoubtedly have fallen to the ground but for the aid of a friendly hand thrust out to catch him. And while Tresler turned to pacify the two thoroughly frightened horses, the little man's angry tones snapped out at him in what was intended for a dignified protest. In spite of his drunken condition, his words were distinct enough, though his voice was thick. After all, as he said, it was his legs that had given way.

"Guess you're that blazin' 'tenderfoot,' Tresler," he said, with all the sarcasm he was capable of at the moment. "Wal, say, Mr. a'mighty Tresler, ef it wa'an't as you wus a 'tenderfoot,' I'd shoot you fer sayin' I wus drunk. Savee? You bein' a 'tenderfoot,' I'll jest mention you're side-tracked, you're most on the scrap heap, you've left the sheer trail an' you're ditched. You've hit a gait you can't travel, an' don't amount to a decent, full-sized jackass. Savee? I ain't drunk."

It's drink ; see? Carney's rotgut. I tell you right here I'm sober, but my legs ain't. Mebbe you're that fool-headed you don't save the difference."

Tresler restrained a further inclination to laugh. He had wasted too much time already, and was anxious to get back to the ranch. He quite realized that Joe knew what he was about, if his legs were *hors-de-combat*, for, after delivering himself of this, his unvarnished opinion, he wisely sought the safer vantage-ground of a sitting posture.

Tresler grabbed at the blanket and pulled it off his shoulders.

"What's this?" he asked sharply.

Joe looked up, his little eyes sparkling with resentment.

"'Tain't yours, anyway," he said. Then he added with less anger, and some uncertainty, "Guess I slept some down at the bushes. Durned plug got busy 'stead o' waitin' around. The fool hoss ain't got no manners anyways."

"Manners? Don't blither." Tresler seized him by the coat collar and yanked him suddenly upon his feet. "Now, hand over that letter to Sergeant Fyles. I've orders to deliver it myself."

Joe's twisted face turned upwards with a comical expression of perplexity. The moonlight caught his eyes and he blinked. Then he looked over at the horses, and, shaking his head solemnly, began to fumble at his pockets.

"S—Sergeant F—Fyles," he answered doubtfully. He seemed to have forgotten the very name. "F—Fyles?" he repeated again. "Letter? Say, now, I wus kind o' wonderin' what I cum to Forks fer. Y' see I mostly git around Forks fer Carney's rotgut. Course, ther' wus a letter. Jest wher' did I put that now?" He became quite cheerful as he probed his pockets.

Tresler waited until, swaying and even stumbling in the process, he had turned out two pockets, then his impatience getting the better of him he proceeded to conduct the search himself,

"Now see here," he said firmly, "I'll go through your pockets. If you've lost it, there'll be trouble for you when you get back. If you'd only kept clear of that saloon you would have been all right."

"That's so," said Joe humbly, as he submitted to the other's search.

Tresler proceeded systematically. There was nothing but tobacco and pipe in the outside pockets of his coat. His trousers revealed a ten-cent piece and a dollar bill, which the choreman thanked him profusely for finding, assuring him, regretfully, that he wouldn't have left the saloon if he had known he had it. The inside pocket of the coat was drawn blank of all but a piece of newspaper, and Tresler pronounced his verdict in no measured terms.

"You drunken little fool, you've lost it," he said, as he held out the unfolded newspaper.

Joe seemed past resentment with his fresh trouble. He squinted hard to get the newspaper into proper focus.

"Say," he observed meekly, "I guess it wus in that, sure. Sure, yes," he nodded emphatically, "I planted it that a-ways to kep it from the dirt. I 'member readin' the headin' o' that paper. Et wus 'bout some high-soundin' female in New Yo——"

"Confound it!" Tresler was more distressed for the little man than angry with him. He knew Jake would be furious. and cast about in his mind for excuses that might save him, The only one he could think of was feeble enough, but he suggested it.

"Well, there's only one thing to do; we must ride back, and you can say you lost the letter on the way out, and have spent the day looking for it."

Joe seemed utterly dejected. "Sure, yes. There's on'y one thing to do," he murmured disconsolately. "We must ride back. Say, you're sure, plumb sure it ain't in one of my pockets? Dead sure I must a' lost it?"

"No doubt of it. Damn it, Joe, I'm sorry. You'll be

in a deuce of a scrape with Jake. It's all that cursed drink."

"That's so," murmured the culprit mournfully. His face was turned away. Now it suddenly brightened as though a fresh and more hopeful view of the matter had presented itself, and his twisted features slowly wreathed themselves into a smile. His deep-set eyes twinkled with an odd sort of mischievous humour as he raised them abruptly to the troubled face of his companion.

"Guess I kind o' fergot to tell you. I gave the sergeant that letter this mornin' 'fore I called on Carney. Mebbe, ef I'd told you 'fore I'd 'a' saved you——"

"You little——"

Tresler could find no words to express his exasperation. He made a grab at the now grinning man's coat-collar, seized him, and, lifting him bodily, literally threw him on to the back of his buckskin pony.

"You little old devil!" he at last burst out; "you stay there, and back you go to the ranch. I'll shake the liquor out of you before we get home."

Tresler sprang into his saddle, and, turning his mare's head homewards, led the buckskin and its drunken freight at a rattling pace. And Joe kept silence for awhile. He felt it was best so. But, in the end, he was the first to speak, and when he did so there was a quiet dryness in his tone that pointed all he said.

"Say, Tresler, I'm kind o' sorry you wus put to all that figgerin' an' argyment," he said, shaking up his old pony to bring him alongside the speedy mare. "Y'see ye never ast me 'bout that letter. Kind o' jumped me fer a fool-head at oncet. Which is most gener'ly the nature o' boys o' your years. Con-clusions is mostly hasty, but I 'lows they're reas'nable in their places—which is last. An' I sez it wi'out offence, ther' ain't a blazin' thing born in this world that don't reckon to con-clude fer itself 'fore it's rightly begun. Everything needs teachin', from a 'tenderfoot' to a New York babby."

Joe's homily banished the last shadow of Tresler's ill-humour. The little man had had the best of him in his quiet, half-drunken manner; a manner which, though rough, was still irresistible.

"That's all right, Joe. I'm no match for you," he said with a laugh. "But, setting jokes on one side, I think you're in for trouble with Jake. I saw it in his eye before I started out."

"I don't think. Guess I'm plumb sure," Joe replied quietly.

"Then why on earth did you do it?"

Joe humped his back with a movement expressive of unconcern.

"It don't matter why. Jake's nigh killed me ha'f a dozen times. One o' these days he'll fix me sure. He'll lace hell out o' me to-morrow, I'm guessin', an' when it's done it won't alter nothin' anyways. I've jest two things in this world, I notion, an'—one of 'em 's drink. 'Tain't no use in sayin' it ain't, cos I guess my legs is most unnatteral truthful 'bout drink. Say, I don't worrit no folk when I'm drunk; guess I don't interfere wi' no one's consarns when I'm drunk; I'm jest kind o' happy when I'm drunk. Which bein' so, makes it no one's bizness but my own. I do it 'cos I gits a heap o' pleasure out o' it. I know I ain't worth hell room. But I got my notions, an' I ain't goin' ter budge fer no one." Joe's slantwise mouth was set obstinately; his little eyes flashed angrily in the moonlight, and his whole attitude was one of a man combatting an argument which his soul is set against.

As Tresler had no idea of arguing the question and remained silent, the choreman went on in a modified tone of morbid self-sympathy—

"When the time comes around I'll hand over my checks wi'out no fuss nor botheration; guess I'll cash in wi' as much grit as George Washington. I don't calc'late as life is wuth worritin' over anyways. We don't ast to be born, an', comin' into the world wi'out no by-your-leave, I don't figger as folks has a right to say we've got to take a hand in any bluff we don't notion."

"Perhaps you've a certain amount of right on your side." Tresler felt that this hopeless pessimism was rather the result of drink than the contrary. "But you said you had two things that you considered worth living for?"

"That's so. I ain't goin' back on what I said. It's jest that other what set me yarnin'. Say, guess you're mostly a pretty decent feller, Tresler, though I 'lows you has failin's. You're kind o' young. Now I guess you ain't never pumped lead into the other feller, which the same he's doin' satisfact'ry by you? You kind o' like most fellers?"

Tresler nodded.

"Jest so. But I've noticed you don't fancy folk as gits gay wi' you. You kind o' make things uneasy. Wal, that's a fault you'll git over. Mebbe, later on, when a feller gits rilin' you you'll work your gun, instead of trying to thump savee into his head. Heads is mighty cur'us out west here. They're so chock full o' savee, ther' ain't no use in thumpin' more into 'em. Et's a heap easier to let it out. But that's on the side. I most gener'ly see things, an' kind o' notice fellers, an' that's how I sized you up. Y'see I've done a heap o' settin' around M'skeeter Bend fer nigh on ten years, mostly watchin'. Now, mebbe, y'ain't never sot no plant, an' bedded it gentle wi' sifted mould, an' watered it careful, an' sot right ther' on a box, an' watched it grow in a spot wher' ther' wa'an't no bizness fer anythin' but weeds?"

Tresler shook his head, wonderingly.

"No; guess not," Joe went on. "Say," he added, turning and looking earnestly into his companion's face, "I'm settin' on that box right now. Yes, sir, I've watched that plant grow. I've picked the stones out so the young shoots could git through nice an' easy-like. I've watered it. I've washened the leaves when the blights come along. I've sticked it against the winds. I've done most everythin' I could, usin' soap-suds and soot waters, an' all they tasty liquids to coax it on. I've sot ther' a-smilin' to see the love-some buds come along an' open out, an' make the air sweet

wi' perfumes an' colour an' things. I've sot right ther' an' tho't an' tho't a heap o' tho'ts around that flower, an' felt all crinkly up the back wi' pleasure. An' I ain't never wanted ter leave that box. No, sir, an' the days wus bright, an' nothin' seemed amiss wi' life nor nothin'. But I tell you it ain't no good. No, sir, 'tain't no good, 'cos I ain't got the guts to git up an' dig hard. I've reached out an' pulled a weed or two, but they weeds had got a holt on that bed 'fore I sot the seedlin', an' they've growed till my pore flower is nigh to be choked. 'Tain't no use watchin' when weeds is growin'. It wants a feller as can dig; an' I guess I ain't that feller. Say, ther's mighty hard diggin' to be done right now, an' the feller as does it has got to do it standin' right up to the job. Savee? I'm sayin' right now to you, Tresler, they weeds is chokin' the life out o' her. She's mazed up wi' 'em. Ther' ain't no escape. None. Her life's bound to be hell anyways."

"Her? Whom?" Tresler asked the question, but he knew that Joe was referring to Diane; Diane's welfare was his other interest in life.

The little man turned with a start. "Eh? Miss Dianny—o' course."

"And the weeds?"

"Jake—an' her father."

And the two men became silent, while their horses ambled leisurely on towards home. It was Tresler who broke the silence at last.

"And this is the reason you've stayed so long on the ranch?" he asked.

"Mebbe. I don't reckon as I could a' done much," Joe answered hopelessly. "What could a drunken choreman do anyways? Leastways the pore kid hadn't got no mother, an' I guess ther' wa'an't a blazin' soul around as she could yarn her troubles to. When she got fixed, I guess ther' wa'an't no one to put her right. An' when things was hatchin', ther' wa'an't no one to give her warnin' but me. 'What is the trouble?'

you'll ast," the little man went on gloomily. "Trouble? Wal, I'd smile. Ther' ain't nothin' but trouble around M'skeeter Bend, sure. Trouble for her—trouble all round. Her trouble's her father, an' Jake. Jake's set on marryin' her. Jake," in a tone of withering scorn, "who's only fit to mate wi' a bitch wolf. An' her father—say, he hates her. Hates her like a neche hates a rattler. An' fer why? Gawd only knows; I ain't never found out. Say, that gal is his slave, sure. Ef she raises her voice, she gits it. Not, I guess, as Jake handles me, but wi' the sneakin' way of a devil. Say, the things he does makes me most ready to cry like a kid. An' all the time he threatens her wi' Jake fer a husband. An' she don't never complain. Not she; no, sir. You don't know the blind hulks, Tresler; but ther', it ain't no use in gassin'. He don't never mean her fer Jake, an' I guess she knows it. But she's plumb scared, anyways."

Tresler contemplated the speaker earnestly in the moonlight. He marvelled at the quaint outward form of the chivalrous spirit within. He was trying to reconcile the antagonistic natures of which this strange little bundle of humanity was made up. For ten years Joe had put up with the bullying and physical brutality of Jake Harnach, so that, in however small a way, he might help to make easy the rough life-path of a lonely girl. And his motives were all unselfish. A latent chivalry held him which no depths of drunkenness could drown. He leant over and held out his hand.

"Joe," he said, "I want to shake hands with you and call you my friend."

The choreman held back for a moment in some confusion. Then, as though moved by sudden impulse, he gripped the hand so cordially offered.

"But I ain't done yet," he said a moment later. He had no wish to advertise his own good deeds. He was pleading for another. Some one who could not plead for herself. His tone had assumed a roughness hardly in keeping with

the gentle, reflective manner in which he had talked of his "flower." "Tresler," he went on, "y're good stuff, but y'ain't good 'nough to dust that gal's boots, no—not by a sight. Meanin' no offence. But she needs the help o' some one as'll dig at them weeds standin'. See? Which means you. I can't tell you all I know, I can't tell you all I've seed. One o' them things—I guess on'y one—is that Jake's goin' to best blind hulks an' force him into givin' him his daughter in marriage, an' Gawd help that pore gal. But I swar to Gawd ef I'm pollutin' this airth on the day as sees Jake worritin' Miss Dianny, I'll perf'rate him till y'can't tell his dog-gone carkis from a parlour cinder-sifter."

"Tell me how I can help, and count me in to the limit," said Tresler, catching, in his eagerness, something of the other's manner of expression.

It was evident by the way the choreman's face lit up at his friend's words that he had hoped for such support, but feared lest he should not get it. Joe Nelson was distinctly worldly wise, but with a heart of gold deep down beneath his wisdom. He had made no mistake in this man whose sympathies he had succeeded in enlisting. He fully understood that he was dealing with just a plain, honest man, otherwise he would have kept silence.

"Wal, I guess ther' ain't a deal to tell." The little man looked straight ahead towards the dark streak which marked the drop from the prairie land to the bed of the Mosquito River. "Still, it's li'ble to come along right smart."

The man's suggestion puzzled Tresler, but he waited. His own mind was clear as to what he personally intended, but it seemed to him that Joe was troubled with other thoughts besides the main object of his discourse. And it was these very side issues that he was keen to learn. However, whatever Joe thought, whatever confusion or perplexity he might have been in, he suddenly returned to his main theme with great warmth of feeling.

"But when it comes, Tresler, you'll stand by? You'll

plug hard fer her, jest as ef it was you he was tryin' to do up? You'll stop him. Say, you'll jest round that gal up into your own corrals, an' set your own brand on her quick, eh? That's what I'm askin'."

"I see. Marry her, eh?"

"An' why not?" asked Joe, quickly. "She's a heap too good fer you. Ther' ain't a feller breathin' amounts to a row o' beans aside o' her. But it's the on'y way to save her from Jake. You'll do it. Yes, sure, you'll do it. I ken see it in your face."

The little fellow was leaning over, peering up into Tresler's face with anxious, almost fierce eyes. His emotion was intense, and at that moment, a refusal would have driven him to despair.

"You are too swift for me, Joe," Tresler said quietly. But his tone seemed to satisfy his companion, for the latter sat back in his saddle with a sigh of relief. "It takes the consent of two people to make a marriage. However," he went on, with deep earnestness, "I'll promise you this, Miss Marbolt shall never marry Jake unless it is her own wish to do so. And, furthermore, she shall never lack a friend, ready to act on her behalf, while I am in the country."

"You've said it."

And the finality of Joe's tone brought silence.

In spite of the punishment he knew to be awaiting him, Joe was utterly happy. It was as though a weight, which had been oppressing him for years, had suddenly been lifted from his shoulders. He would cheerfully have ridden on to any terror ever conceived by the ruthless Jake. Diane's welfare—Diane's happiness; it was the keynote of his life. He had watched. He knew. Tresler was willing enough to marry her, and she—he chuckled joyfully to himself.

"Jake ain't a dorg's chance—a yaller dorg's chance. When the 'tenderfoot' gits good an' goin' he'll choke the life out o' Master Jake. Gee!"

And Tresler, too, was busy with his thoughts. Joe's

suggestion had brought him face to face with hard fact, and, moreover, in a measure, he had pledged himself. Now he realized, after having listened to the little man's story, how much he had fallen in love with Diane. Joe, he knew, loved her as a father might love his child, or a gardener his flowers; but his was the old, old story that brought him a delight such as he felt no one else had ever experienced. Yes, he knew now he loved Diane with all the strength of his powerful nature; and he knew, too, that there could be little doubt but that he had fallen a victim to the beautiful dark, sad face he had seen peering up at him from beneath the straw sun-hat, at the moment of their first meeting. Would he marry Diane? Ay—a thousand times ay—if she would have him. But there it was that he had more doubts than Joe. Would she marry him? he asked himself, and a chill damped the ardour of his thoughts.

And so, as they rode on, he argued out the old arguments of the lover; so he wrestled with all the old doubts and fears. So he became absorbed in an ardent train of thought which shut out all the serious issues which he felt, that, for his very love's sake, he should have probed deeply. So he rode on impervious to the keen, studious, sidelong glances, wise old, drunken old Joe favoured him with; impervious to all, save the flame of love this wild old ranchman had fanned from a smouldering ember to a living fire; impervious to time and distance, until the man at his side, now thoroughly sobered, called his attention to their arrival at the ranch.

"Say, boy," he observed, "that's the barn yonder. 'Fore we git ther' ther's jest one thing more. Jake's goin' to play his hand by force. Savee? Mebbe we've a notion o' that force—Miss Dianny an' me——"

"Yes, and we must think this thing thoroughly out, Joe. Developments must be our cue. We can do nothing but wait and be ready. There are the police——"

"Eh? Police?" Joe swung round, and was peering up into Tresler's face.

"Ah, I forgot." Tresler's expression was very thoughtful. They had arrived at the barn, and were dismounting. "I was following out my own train of thought. I agree with you, Joe, Red Mask and his doings are at the bottom of this business." His voice had dropped now to a low whisper lest any one should chance to be around.

Without a word Joe led his horse into the barn, and, off-saddling him, fixed him up for the night. Tresler did the same for his mare. Then they came out together. At the door Joe paused.

"Say," he remarked simply, "I jest didn't know you wus that smart."

"Don't credit me with smartness. It's—poor little girl."

"Ah!" Joe's face twisted into his apish grin. "Say, you'll stick to what you said?"

"Every word of it."

"Good; the rest's doin' itself, sure."

And they went their several ways; Joe to the kitchen of the house, and Tresler to his dusty mattress in the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER IX

TRESLER INVOLVES HIMSELF FURTHER ; THE LADY JEZEBEL IN A FREAKISH MODE

ENTHUSIASM is the mainspring of a cowboy's life. Without enthusiasm a cowboy inevitably falls to the inglorious level of a "hired man ;" a nice distinction in the social conditions of frontier life. The cowboy is sometimes a good man—not meaning a man of religion—and often a bad man. He is rarely indifferent. There are no half measures with him. His pride is in his craft. He will lavish the tenderness of a mother for her child upon his horse ; he will play poker till he has had the doubtful satisfaction of seeing his last cent pass into somebody's else's pocket ; he will drink on the most generous scale, and is ever ready to quarrel. Even in this last he believes in thoroughness. But he has many good points which often outweigh his baser instincts. They can be left to the imagination ; for it is best to know the worst of him at the outset to get a proper, and not a glorified estimate of his true character. The object of this story is to give a veracious, and not a highly gilded picture of the hardy prairie man of days gone by.

Before all things the cowboy is a horseman. His pride in this almost amounts to a craze. His fastidiousness in horseflesh, in his accoutrements, his boots, his chapps, his jaunty silk handkerchief about his neck, even to the gauntlets he so often wears upon his hands, is an education in dandyism. He is a thorough dandy in his outfit. And the greater the dandy,

the more surely is he a capable horseman. He is not a horse-breaker by trade, but he loves "broncho-busting" as a boy loves his recreation. It comes to him as a relief from the tedium of branding, feeding, rounding up, cutting out, mending fences, and all the utility work of the ranch. Every unbroken colt is like a ticket in a lottery; it may be easy, or it may be a tartar. And the tartar is the prize that every cow-puncher wants to draw so that he may demonstrate his horsemanship.

Broncho-busting was the order of the next day at Mosquito Bend, and all hands were agog, and an element of general cheeriness pervaded the bunkhouse whilst breakfast was in preparation. Marbolt had obtained a contract to supply the police with a large band of remounts, and the terms demanded that each animal must be saddle-broken.

Tresler, with the rest, was up betimes. He, too, was going to take his part in the horse-breaking. While breakfast was in the course of preparation he went out to overhaul his saddle. There must be no doubtful straps in his gear. Each saddle would have a heavy part to play, and his own, being one he had bought second-hand from one of his comrades, needed looking to.

He was very thoughtful as he went about his work. His overnight talk with Joe Nelson had made him realize that he was no longer a looker-on, a pupil, simply one of the hands on the ranch. Hitherto he had felt, in a measure, free in his actions. He could do as it pleased him to do. He could have severed himself from the ranch, and washed his hands of all that was doing there. Now it was different. Whether he would or no he must play out his part. He had taken a certain stand, and that stand involved him with responsibilities which he had no wish to shirk.

His saddle was in order, his mare had been rubbed down and fed, and he was leisurely strolling over to the bunkhouse for breakfast. And as he passed the foreman's hut he heard Jake's voice from within hailing him with unwonted cheeriness.

"Mornin', Tresler," he called out. "Late gettin' in last night."

Tresler moved over and stood in the doorway. He was wary of the tone, and answered coolly—

"Yes; the mare bolted this side of the ford, and took me ten miles south. When I got on the Forks trail I met Nelson on his way home."

"Ah, that mare's the very devil. How are you doin' with her now?"

"Oh, so, so. She leads me a dance, but I'd rather have her than any plug you've got on the ranch. She's the finest thing I've ever put a leg over."

"Yes, guess that's so. The boss was always struck on her. I kind of remember when she came. She wasn't bred hereabouts. The old man bought her from some half-breed outfit goin' through the country three years ago—that's how he told me. Then we tried to break her. Say, you've done well with her, boy."

Jake had been lacing up a pair of high field boots; they were massive things with heavy, clumped soles, iron tips and heels. Now he straightened up.

"Did Nelson say why he was late?" he went on abruptly.

"No. And I didn't ask him."

"Ah, knew it, I s'pose. Drunk?"

"No."

Tresler felt that the lie was a justifiable one.

"Then what the devil kept the little swine?"

Jake's brows suddenly lowered, and the savage tone was no less than the coarse brutality of his words. The other's coolness grew more marked.

"That was none of my concern. He'd delivered the letter, and it was only left for me to hurry him home."

"I'll swear he was loafin' around the saloon all day. Say, I guess I'll see him later."

Tresler shrugged and turned away. He wanted to tell this man what he thought of him. He felt positively

murderous towards him. He had never met anybody who could so rouse him. Sooner or later a crisis would come, in spite of his reassurances to Diane, and then—Jake watched him go. Then he turned again to the contemplation of his great boots, and muttered to himself.

"It won't be for long—no, not for long. But not yet. Ther's too much hangin' to it——" He broke off, and his fierce eyes looked after the retreating man.

The unconscious object of these attentions meanwhile reached the bunkhouse. Breakfast was well on, and he had to take his pannikin and plate round to Teddy's cookhouse to get his food. "Slushy," as the cook was familiarly called, dipped him out a liberal measure of pork and beans, and handed him half a loaf of new-made bread. Jinks was no niggard, and Tresler was always welcome to all he needed.

"Goin' to ride?" the youth demanded, as he filled the pannikin with tea.

"Why, of course." Tresler had almost forgotten the change of work that had been set out for the day. His face brightened now as the cook reminded him of it. "Wouldn't miss it for a lot. That mare of mine has given me a taste for that sort of thing."

"Taste!" Teddy exclaimed, with a scornful wave of his dipper. "Belly full, I tho't, mebbe." He turned to his stove and shook the ashes down. "Say," he went on, over his shoulder, "guess I'm bakin' hash in mine. Ther' ain't so much glory, but ther's a heap more comfort to it."

Tresler passed out smiling at the youth's ample philosophy. But the smile died out almost on the instant. A half-smothered cry reached him from somewhere in the direction of the barn. He stood for an instant with his brows knitted.

The next, and his movements became almost electrical.

Now the man's deliberate character flatly contradicted itself. There was no pause for consideration, no thought for what was best to do. He had heard that cry, and had recognized the voice. It was a cry that summoned him, and

wrung the depths of his heart. His breakfast was pitched to the ground. And, as though fate had ordained it, he beheld a heavy raw-hide quirt lying on the ground where he had halted. He grabbed the cruel weapon up, and set off at a run in the direction whence the cry had come.

His feet were still encased in the soft mocassin slippers he usually wore in exchange for his riding boots, and, as he ran, they gave out no sound. It was a matter of fifty yards to the foreman's hut, and he sprinted this in even time, keeping the building between himself and a direct view of the barn, in the region of which lay his destination. And as he ran the set expression of his face boded ill for some one. Jaws and mouth were clenched to a fierce rigidity that said far more than any words could have done.

He paused for one breathless instant at the hither side of the foreman's hut. It was because he heard Jake's voice cursing on the other side of it. Then he heard that which made his blood leap to his brain. It was a stifled cry in Nelson's now almost unrecognizable voice. And its piteous appeal aroused in him a blind fury.

He charged round the building in half a dozen strides. One glance at the scene was sufficient. Poor old Joe Nelson was lying on the ground, his arms thrown out to protect his head, while Jake, his face ablaze, stood over him, kicking him with his cruel field boots, with a force and brutishness that promised to break every bone in the old man's body.

It all came to him in a flash.

Then he leapt with a rush at the author of the unnatural scene. The butt of his quirt was uplifted. It swung above his head a full half-circle, then it descended with that whistling split of the air that told of the rage and force that impelled it. It took the giant square across the face, laying the flesh open and sending the blood spurting with its vicious impact. It sent him reeling backwards with a howl of pain, like a child at the slash of an admonishing cane. And Jake's hands went up to his wound at once; but, even so, his movements

were not swift enough to protect him from a second slash of the vengeful thong. And Tresler's aim was so swift and sure that the bully fell to the ground like a pole-axed steer.

And with Jake's fall the tension of Tresler's rage relaxed. He could have carried the chastisement further with a certain wild delight, but he was no savage, only a real, human man, outraged and infuriated by the savagery of another. His one thought was for his poor old friend, and he dropped on his knees, and bent over the still, shrunken form in a painful anxiety. He called to him, and put one hand under the grey old head and raised it up. And as he did so the poor fellow's eyes opened. Joe murmured something unintelligible, and Tresler was about to speak again, when a movement behind him changed his purpose and brought him to his feet with a leap.

Nor was he any too soon. And his rage lit anew as he saw Jake struggling to rise. In an instant he was standing over him threateningly.

"Move, and I'll paralyze you!" he cried hoarsely.

And Jake made no further effort. He lay back with a growl of impotent rage, while his hands moved uneasily, mopping his blood-stained features.

Now it was, for the first time, Tresler became aware that the men from the bunkhouse had come upon the scene.

The sight of all those faces gazing in wide-eyed astonishment at the fallen Jake brought home to him something of the enormity of his offence, and it behoved him to get Joe out of further harm's way. He stooped, and gathering the little choreman tenderly into his powerful arms, lifted him on to his shoulders and strode away to the bunkhouse, followed by his silent, wondering comrades.

He deposited Joe upon his own bed, and the men crowded round. And questions and answers came in a wild volley about him.

It was Arizona who spoke least and rendered most assistance. Together he and Tresler undressed the patient and

treated him to a rough surgical examination. They soon found that no limbs were broken, but of his ribs they were less certain. He was severely bruised about the head, and this latter no doubt accounted for his unconsciousness. Cold water, harshly applied, though with kind intent, was the necessary restorative, and after awhile the twisted face took on a hue of life and the eyes opened. Then Tresler turned to the men about him.

"Boys," he said gravely, "I want you all to remember that this is purely my affair. Joe's and mine—and Jake's. I shall settle it in my own way. For the present we have our work to do."

There was a low murmur, and Arizona raised a pair of fierce eyes to his face. He was going to speak—to voice a common thought; but Tresler understood and cut him short.

"Go easy, Arizona. We're good friends all. You wouldn't like me to interfere in a quarrel of yours."

"That's so—but——"

"Never mind the 'buts.'" And Tresler's keen, honest eyes looked squarely into the seared face of the wild American.

For a moment the men stood around looking on with lowering faces, eyeing the prostrate man furtively. But Tresler's attitude gave them no encouragement, and even Arizona felt the influence of his strong personality. Suddenly, as though with a struggle, the cowboy swung round on his fellows and his high-pitched tones filled the silent room.

"Come right on, boys. Guess he's right. We'll git." And he moved towards the door.

And the men, after the slightest possible hesitation, passed out in his wake. Tresler waited until the door had closed behind the last of them, then he turned to the injured man.

"Feeling better, Joe?"

"Feelin' better? Why, yes, I guess."

Joe's answer came readily, but in a weak voice.

"No bones broken?"

"Bones? Don't seem."

Tresler seated himself on the bunk and looked into the grey face. At last he rose and prepared to go, but Joe detained him with a look.

"Say—they're gone?" he murmured.

The other sat down again. "Yes."

"Good." Joe sighed and re-closed his eyes; but it was only for a second. He opened them again and went on. "Say, you won't tell her—Miss Dianny. Don't you tell her. Pore little soul, she'll wep them pretty eyes o' her's out, sure. Y'see, I know her. Y'see, I did git drunk yesterday. I knew I'd git it. So it don't signify. Don't tell her."

"She'll be sure to hear of it."

"Say, Tresler," Joe went on, ignoring the other's objection. "Go easy; jest say nothin'. Kind o' fergit this thing fer the time. Ther's other work fer you. I'd a heap sooner I'd bin killed than you git roped into this racket. It's Miss Dianny you're to look to, not me; an' now, mebbe, they'll run you off'n the ranch."

Tresler shook his head decidedly. "Don't be afraid; they can't get rid of me, Joe," he said.

"Ah! Wal, I guess meanwhiles you'd best git off to work. I'll pull round after awhile. You see, you must go dead easy w' Jake, cos o' her. Mind it's her—on'y her. You sed it last night. Mebbe this thing's goin' to make trouble. Trouble fer you; an' trouble fer you means trouble fer her."

"I'm going."

Tresler saw the force of the other's argument. He must give them no further hold to turn on him. Yes, he saw how bad his position would be in the future. He wondered what would come of that morning's work; and, in spite of his confident assurance to Joe, he dreaded now lest there should be any means for them to get rid of him. He moved towards the door.

"All right, Joe. I'll keep a check on myself in the future," he said. "But don't you go and get drunk again or——"

He broke off. Flinging the door open to pass out, he found himself face to face with the object of their solicitude. Diane had been about to knock, and now started back in confusion. She had not expected this. She thought Tresler was with the "breaking" party. The man saw her distress, and the anxiety in her sweet brown eyes. He knew that at that moment all her thought was for Joe. It was the basket on her arm, full of comforts, that told him. And he knew, too, that she must have been a witness to the disgraceful scene by the barn, for how else could she have learned so quickly what had happened. He put his finger on his lip to silence her, while he closed the bunkhouse door behind him. Then he responded to the inquiry he saw in her eager, troubled face.

"He is better, Miss Diane. He will soon be all right," he added, keeping his voice low lest it should reach the man inside. "Can I give him anything for you? Any message?" He glanced significantly from her face to the basket on her arm.

The girl did not answer at once. Her eyes looked seriously up into his face.

"Thank you," she said at last, a little vaguely. Then she broke out eagerly, and Tresler understood the feeling that prompted her. "I saw the finish of it all," she went on; "oh, the dreadful finish. Thank God I did not see the rest. When you bore him off on your shoulders I thought he was dead. Then I felt I could not stay away. While I was wondering how to get down here without attracting attention, Sergeant Fyles of the police arrived, and father and he went at once into the office. I knew Jake would be out of the way. I waited until Anton had disappeared with the policeman's horse, then I hurried down here. Can I see him now? I have a few little luxuries here which I scrambled together for him."

The girl's appeal was irresistible. Nor was Tresler the man to attempt the impossible. Besides, she knew all, so

there was nothing to hide from her. He glanced over at the barn. The men had already saddled. He saw Arizona leading two horses, and recognized Lady Jezebel as one of them. The wild American had saddled his mare for him, and the friendliness of the act pleased him.

"Yes, go in and see him," he said. "The place hasn't been cleaned up yet, but perhaps you won't mind that. You will come like an angel of comfort to poor Joe. Poor old fellow! He thinks only of you. You are his one care in life. It will be like a ray of sunshine in his clouded life to be waited on by you. I need hardly give you the caution, but—don't stay long."

Diane nodded, and Tresler stepped aside. The girl's hand was on the door latch; she hesitated a moment, and finally faced about.

"Sergeant Fyles is here now," she said significantly. "The raiders; do you think you ought——?"

"I am going to see him."

"Yes." The girl nodded. She would have said more, but her companion cut her short.

"I must go," he said. Then he pointed over at the mare. "You see?" he added. "She is in view of Jake's window."

The next moment they had parted.

The Lady Jezebel was very fretful when Tresler mounted her. She treated him to a mild display of bad temper, and then danced boisterously off down the trail, and her progress was as much made on her hind legs as on all fours. Once round the bend her rider tried to bring her to a halt, but no persuasion could reduce her to the necessary docility. She fretted on until, exasperated, the man jabbed her sharply with the spurs. Then the mischief started. Her head went down and her back humped, and she settled to a battle royal.

It was in the midst of this that another horseman rounded the bend and rode leisurely on to the field of battle. He drew up and watched the conflict with interest. His own

great rawboned bay taking quite as enthusiastic an interest in what was going forward as its rider.

The mare fought like a demon ; but Tresler had learned too much for her, and sat on his saddle as though glued to it ; and the new-comer's interest became blended with admiration for the exhibition of horsemanship he was witnessing. As suddenly as she had begun the lady desisted. It was in a pause for breath that she raised her infuriated head and espied the intruder. Doubtless, realizing the futility of her efforts, and at the same time not wishing one of the opposite sex to witness her defeat, she preferred to disguise her anger and give the impression of a quiet, frivolous gambol, for she whinnied softly and stared, with ears pricked and head erect, in a haughty look of inquiry at the more cumbersome figure of the bay.

And her rider, too, had time to look around. His glance at once fell upon the stranger, and he knew that it was the man he wanted to talk to.

The two men met with little formality.

"Sergeant Fyles?" Tresler said as he came up.

He had noticed the brown canvas tunic with the gold chevrons on the arm, and had seen the side-arms the man wore. There was something wonderfully picturesque yet business-like about these prairie sleuths. This man was the first he had seen and he studied him with interest. The thought of Sergeant Fyles had come so suddenly into his mind, and so recently, that he had had no time to form any imaginative picture of him. Had he done so he must inevitably have been disappointed with the reality, for Fyles was neither becoming nor even imposing. He was rather short and decidedly burly, and his face had an innocent caste about it, a farmer-like mould of russet-tanned features that was extremely healthy-looking, but in no way remarkable for any appearance of great intelligence.

But this was a case of the fallibility of appearances. Fyles was both remarkable for a great intelligence and extreme shrewdness. Not only that, he was a man of cat-like activity.

His bulk was the result of a superabundance of muscle, and not of superfluous tissue. His bucolic spread of features was useful to him in that it detracted from the cold, keen, compelling eyes which looked out from beneath his shaggy eye-brows; and, too, the full cheeks and fat neck, helped to hide the determined jaws, which had a knack of closing his rather full lips into a thin, straight line. Nature never intended a man of his mould to occupy the position that Sergeant Fyles held in the police. He was one of her happy mistakes.

And in that first survey Tresler realized something of the personality which form and features were so ludicrously struggling to conceal.

"Yes." The officer let his eyes move slowly over this stranger. Then, without the least expression of cordiality he spoke the thought in his mind. "That's a good nag—remarkably good. You handle her tolerably. Didn't get your name?"

"Tresler—John Tresler."

"Yes. New hereabouts?"

The broad-shouldered man had an aggravatingly official manner. Tresler replied with a nod.

"Ah! Remittance man?"

At this the other laughed outright. He saw it was useless to display any anger.

"Wrong," he said. "Learning the business of ranching. Going to start on my own account later on."

"Ah! Younger son?"

"Not even a younger son?" The two horses were now moving leisurely on towards the ford. "Suppose we quit questions and answers that serve no particular purpose, sergeant. I have been waiting to see you."

"So I figured," observed the other, imperturbably, "or you wouldn't have answered my questions so amiably. Well?"

The officer permitted himself a sort of wintry smile, while his watchful eyes wandered interestedly over the surrounding bush.

"There are things doing about this country," Tresler began a little lamely. "You've possibly heard?"

"Things are generally doing in a cattle country where brands are easily changed and there is no official to inquire who has changed them."

Fyles glanced admiringly down at Lady Jezebel's beautiful clean legs.

"This Red Mask?" Tresler asked.

"Exactly."

"You've heard the story of his latest escapade? The murder of Manson Orr?"

"From Mr. Marbolt—and others. In telling me, the blind man offered five thousand dollars' reward for the capture of the man."

"That's better than I hoped for," replied Tresler, musingly. "You see," he went on, "the blind man's something cantankerous. He's lost cattle himself, but when some of the boys offered to hunt Red Mask down, he treated them with scant courtesy—in fact, threatened to discharge any man who left the ranch on that quest."

"I found him amiable."

"You would." Tresler paused. This man was difficult to talk to, and he wanted to say so much. Suddenly he turned and faced him, and, to his chagrin, discovered that the other was still intent on the mare he was riding. His eyes were fixed on the lady's shoulder, where the indistinct marks of the brand were still visible. "You see, sergeant," he went on, ignoring the other's abstraction, "I have a story to tell you, which, in your official capacity, you may find interesting. In the light of recent events, I, at all events, find it interesting. It has set me thinking a heap."

"Go ahead," said the officer, without even so much as raising his eyes. Tresler followed the direction of his gaze, but could see nothing more interesting in his mare's fore-quarters than their perfect shape. However, there was no alternative but to proceed with his narrative. And he told the

policeman of the visit of the night-riders which he had witnessed on the night of his arrival at the ranch. In spite of the other's apparent abstraction, he told the story carefully and faithfully, and his closing remarks were well pointed and displayed a close analysis. He told him of the previous visits of these night-riders, and the results following upon the circulation of the story by each individual who chanced to witness them. He told him of Joe Nelson's warning to him, and how his earnestness had, at length, persuaded him to keep quiet. He felt no scruples in thus changing the responsibility of Diane's warning. Nothing would have induced him to drag her name into the matter.

"You see, sergeant," he said in conclusion, "I think I did right to keep this matter to myself until such time as I could tell it to you. It has all happened several times before, and, therefore, will no doubt happen again. What do you think?"

"She's the finest thing I've ever set two eyes on. There's only one like her—eh?" Tresler had given audible expression to his impatience, and the officer abruptly withdrew his gaze from the mare. "It's interesting—decidedly."

"Did Marbolt tell you of the previous visits of these raiders? He knows of them."

"He told me more than I had time to listen to."

"How?"

"He told me of the revolutionary spirit pervading the ranch."

"Ah!"

Tresler saw the trap the wily police officer had laid for him and refused the bait. Evidently the blind man had told his version of that morning's doings, and the sergeant wished to learn the men's side of it. Probably his, Tresler's. This calm, cold man seemed to depend in no way upon verbal answers for the information he desired, for he went on without any appearance of expecting a reply.

"There's one thing you've made plain to me. You

suspect collusion between these raiders and some one on the ranch."

"Yes. I meant you to understand that."

"Whom do you suspect? And your reasons?"

The two questions rapped out one after the other like lightning.

"My suspicions rest nowhere, because I can find no reason."

They had drawn rein at the ford. Fyles now looked keenly into Tresler's face, and his glance was full of meaning.

"I'm glad I've had this talk with you, Mr. Tresler. You have a keen faculty for observation, and a wise caution. When you have reason to suspect any one, and wish to tell me of it, you can communicate with me at any hour of the day or night. I know this ranch well by repute. So well, in fact, that I came out here to find you. You see, you also were known to me—through mutual acquaintances in Forks. Now your excellent caution will tell you that it would be bad policy for you to communicate openly with me. Good. Your equally excellent observation will have called your attention to this river. I have a patrol stationed further down stream, for certain reasons which I will keep to myself. It is a hidden patrol, but it will always be there. Now, to a man of your natural cleverness, I do not think you will have any difficulty in finding a means of floating a message down to me. But do not send an urgent message unless the urgency is positive. Any message I receive in that way I shall act upon at once. I have learned a great deal to-day, Mr. Tresler, so much indeed that I even think you may need to use this river before long. All I ask of you is to be circumspect—that's the word, circumspect."

The officer edged his horse away so that he could obtain a good view of Lady Jezebel. And he gazed at her with so much intentness that Tresler felt he must call attention to it.

"She is a beauty," he suggested.

And Fyles answered with a sharp question. "Is she yours?"

"No. Only to use."

"Belongs to the ranch?"

"Jake told me she is a mare the blind man bought from a half-breed outfit passing through the country. He sets great store by her, but they couldn't tame her into reliability. That's three years ago. By her mouth I should say she was rising seven."

"That's so. She'd be rising seven. She's a dandy."

"You seem to know her."

But Fyles made no answer. He swung his horse round, and, raising his hand in a half-military salute in token of "good-bye," called over his shoulder as his bay took to the water—

"Don't forget the river."

Tresler looked after him for some moments, then his mare suddenly reared and plunged into the water to follow. He understood at once that fresh trouble was brewing in her ill-balanced equine mind, and took her sharply to task. She couldn't buck in the water; and, finally, after another prolonged battle, she dashed out of it and on to the bank again. But in the scrimmage she had managed to get the side-bar of the bit between her teeth, and, as she landed, she stretched out her lean neck, and, with a snort of ill-temper, set off headlong down the trail.

CHAPTER X

A WILD RIDE

THE intractability of the Lady Jezebel was beyond all bounds. Her vagaries were legion. After his experiences with her, Tresler might have been forgiven the vanity of believing, in spite of her sex, that he had fathomed her every mood. But she was for ever springing unpleasant surprises, and her present one was of a more alarming nature than anything that had gone before. One of her tricks, bolting, was not so very serious, but now she proved herself a "blind bolter." And among horsemen there is only one thing to do with a blind bolter—shoot it. A horse of this description seems to be imbued with but one idea—a furious desire to go, to run anywhere, to run into anything lying in its course, to run on until its strength is spent, or its career is suddenly terminated by a forcible full stop.

At the bend of the trail the mare took blindly to the bush. Chance guided her on to a cattle-path which cut through to the pine-woods beyond. It was but a matter of moments before her rider saw the dark shadow of the woodlands come at him with a rush, and he plunged headlong into the grey twilight of their virgin depths. He had just time to crouch down in the saddle, with his face buried in the tangle of the creature's flying mane, when the drooping boughs, laden with their sad foliage, swept his back. He knew there were only two courses open to him. Either he must sit tight and chance his luck till the mad frolic was spent, or throw himself

headlong from the saddle at the first likely spot. A more experienced horseman would, no doubt, have chosen the latter course without a second thought. But he preferred to stay with the mare. He was loth to admit defeat. She had never bested him yet, and a sort of petty vanity refused to allow him to acknowledge her triumph now. They might come to an opening, he told himself, a stretch of open country. The mare might tire of the forest gloom and turn prairie-wards. These things suggested themselves merely as an excuse for his foolhardiness in remaining in the saddle, not that he had any hope of their fulfilment.

And so it was. Nothing moved the animal out of her course, and it seemed almost as though a miracle were in operation. For, in all that labyrinth of tree-trunks, a sheer road constantly opened out before them. Once, and once only, disaster was within an ace of him. She brushed a mighty black-barked giant with her shoulders. Tresler's knee struck it with such painful force that his foot was wrenched from the stirrup and dragged back so that the rowel of his spur was plunged, with terrific force, into the creature's flank. She responded to the blow with a sideways leap, and it was only by sheer physical strength her rider retained his seat. Time and again the reaching boughs swept him and tore at his clothes, frequently lacerating the flesh beneath with the force of their impact.

These things, however, were only minor troubles as he raced down the grim forest aisles. His thoughts centred themselves on the main chance—the chance that embraced life and death. An ill-fate might, at any moment, plunge horse and rider headlong into one of those silent sentries. It would mean anything. Broken limbs at the best. But Providence ever watches over the reckless horseman, and, in spite of a certain native caution in most things, Tresler certainly was that. He knew no fear of this jade of a mare, and deep down in his heart there was a wild feeling of joy, a whole-hearted delight in the very madness of the race.

And the animal herself, untamed, unchecked, frothing at her bit, her sides a-lather with foam, her barrel tucked like that of a finely trained racehorse, rushed blindly on. The forest echoed and re-echoed with the dull thud of her hoofs as they pounded the thick underlay of rotting cones. And her rider breathed hard as he lay with his head beside the reeking neck, and watched for the coming of the end.

Suddenly, in the midst of the grey, he saw a flash of sunlight. It was like a beacon light to a storm-driven mariner. It was only a gleam of sunshine and was gone almost at once, but it told him that he was fast coming on the river. The final shoals, maybe, where wreck alone awaited him. Just for an instant his purpose wavered. There was still time to drop to the ground. He would have to chance the mare's flying heels. And it might save him.

But the idea was driven from his head almost before he realized it; the mare swerved like a skidding vehicle. He clung desperately to her mane, one arm was even round her neck in a forcible embrace. The struggle lasted only a few seconds. Then, as he recovered his equilibrium, he saw that she had turned into what was undoubtedly a well-defined, but long-disused, forest trail. The way was clear of obstruction. The trees had parted, opening up a wide avenue, and above him shone the perfect azure of the summer sky.

He was amazed. Where could such a trail lead? His answer came immediately. Away ahead of him, towering above the abundant foliage, he saw the distant shimmer of snowy peaks, and nearer—so near as to make him marvel aloud—the forest-clad, broken lands of the foothills. Immediate danger was past, and he had time to think. At all costs he must endeavour to stop the racing beast under him. So he began a vicious sawing at her mouth. His efforts only drove her faster, and caused her to throw her head higher and higher, until her crown was within six inches of his face.

The futility of his purpose was almost ludicrous. He desisted. And the Lady Jezebel lowered her head with an

angry snort and rushed on harder than ever. And now the race continued without relaxing. Once or twice Tresler thought he detected other hoof-marks on the trail, but his impression of them was very uncertain. One thing surely struck him, however: since entering this relic of the old Indian days, a decided change had come over the mare. She was no longer running blind; more, it seemed to him that she displayed that inexpressible familiarity with her surroundings which a true horseman can always detect, yet never describe. This knowledge led him to the hope of the passing of her temper.

But his hope was an optimistic mistake. The sweat pouring from neck, shoulders, and flanks, she still lifted her mud-brown barrel to her mighty stride, with all the vim and lightness of the start. He felt that, jade that she was, she ran because she loved it; ran with a delight that acted as a safety-valve for her villainous temper. She would run herself into amiability and then stop, but not before. And he knew her temper so well that he saw many miles still lying ahead of him.

The rift was gradually widening, and the forest on either side thinned. The trees were wider and more scattered, and the broken hill-tops, which but now had been well ahead, were frowning right over him, and he knew, by the steady, gradual rise of the country, that he would soon be well within the maze of forest, crag, and ravine, which composed the mountain foothills.

At last the forest broke and the ragged land leapt into full view with magical abruptness. It was as though Nature had grown her forest within the confines of a field embraced by an imaginary hedge. There were no outskirts, no dwindling away. It ended in one clean-cut line. And beyond lay the rampart hills, fringed and patched with dishevelled bluff, split by rifts and yawning chasms. And ever they rose higher and higher as the distance gained, and, though summer was not yet at its height, it was gaunt-looking, torn, chaotic, a land of desolation.

The mare held straight on. The change of scene had no effect on her; the trail still lay before her, and she seemed satisfied with it. Tresler looked for the river. He knew it was somewhere near by. He gazed out, away to the right, and his conjecture proved at once. There it lay, the Mosquito River, narrowed and foaming, a torrent with high, clean-cut banks. He followed its course ahead and saw that the banks lost themselves in the shadow between towering almost barren hills, which promised the narrow mouth of a valley beyond.

And as he watched these things, a feeling of uneasiness came over him. The split between the hills looked so narrow. He looked for the trail. It seemed to make straight for the opening. As the ground flew under him, he turned once more to the river and followed its course with his eyes, and suddenly he was thrilled with his first real feeling of apprehension. The river on the right, and the hill on the left of him were converging! Nor could he avoid that meeting-point

He was borne on by the bolting mare. There was not the smallest hope of restraining her. Whatever lay before him, he must face it, and face it with every faculty alert and ready. His mouth parched, and he licked his lips. He was facing a danger now that was uncertain, and the uncertainty of it strung him with a nervous apprehension.

Bluff succeeded bluff in rapid succession. The hill on the left had become a sheer cliff, and the general aspect of the country, that of a tremendous gorge. The trail rose slightly and wound its tortuous way in such an aggravating manner that it was impossible for him to see what lay before him.

At one point he came to a fork where another trail, less defined, branched away to the right. For a moment he dreaded lest the mare should adopt the new way. He knew what lay out there—the river. However, his fears were quickly allayed. The Lady Jezebel had no intention of leaving the road she was on.

They passed the fork, and he sighed his relief. But his

relief was short-lived. Without a sign or warning the trail he was on died out, and his course lay over a narrow level flat sparsely dotted with small, stubbly bush. Now he knew that the mare had been true to herself. She had passed the real trail by, and was running headlong to——

He dared think no more. He knew the crisis was at hand. He had reached the narrowest point of the opening between the two hills, and there stretched the river right across his path less than fifty yards ahead. It took no central course—as might have been expected—through the gorge. It met the left-hand cliff diagonally, and, further on, adopted its sheer side for its left bank. He saw the clearly defined cutting, sharp, precise, before it reached the cliff, and he was riding straight for it!

In that first moment of realization he passed through every sensation of fear; but no time was given him for thought. Fifty yards! What was that to the raking stride of his untamed mare? It would be gone in a few seconds. Action was the only thing to serve him, and such action as instinct prompted him to was utterly unavailing. With a mighty heave of his body, and with all the strength of his sinewy arms, he tried to pull the creature on to her haunches. As well try to stem the tide ahead of him. She threw up her head until it nearly struck him in the face; she pawed the air with her great front legs; then, as he released her, she rushed forward again with a vicious snort.

His case seemed utterly hopeless. He sat down tight in the saddle, leaning slightly forward. He held his reins low, keeping a steady strain upon them. There was a vague, wild thought in his mind. He knew the river had narrowed. Was it a possible jump? He feared the very worst, but clung desperately to the hope. He would lift the creature to it when it came, anyhow. Would she see it? Would she, freakish brute that she was, realize her own danger, and, for once in her desperate life, do one sensible act? He did not expect it. He dared not hope for that. He only wondered.

He could see the full extent of the chasm now. And he thrilled as he realized that it was broader than he had supposed. Worse, the far bank was lower, and a fringe of bush hung at its very edge. His jaws tightened as he came up. He could hear the roar of the torrent below, and, to his strained fancy, it seemed to come up from the very bowels of the earth.

A few more strides. He timed his effort with a judgment inspired by the knowledge that his life depended on it—it, and the mare.

The chasm now came at him with a rush. Suddenly he leant over and let out a wild "halloo!" in the creature's ears. At the same time he lifted her and plunged his spurs hard into her flanks. The effect was instantaneous, electrical. Just for an instant it seemed to him that some unseen power had suddenly shot her from under him. He had a sensation of being left behind, while yet he was rushing through the air with the saddle flying from under him. Then all seemed still, and he was gliding, the lower part of his body struggling to outstrip the rest of him. He had an impression of some great depth below him, though he knew he saw nothing, heard nothing. There came a great jolt. He lurched on to the animal's neck, recovered himself, and, the next instant, the old desperate gallop was going on as before.

He looked back and shivered as he saw the gaping rift behind him. The jump had been terrific, and, as he realized the marvel of the feat, he leant over and patted the mare's reeking shoulder. She had performed an act after her own wild heart.

And Tresler laughed aloud at the thought. He could afford to laugh now, for he saw the end of his journey coming. He had landed on the trail he had lost, in all probability the continuation across the river of the branch road he had missed on the other side, and this was heading directly for the hill before him. More, he could see it winding its way up the hill. Even the Lady Jezebel, he thought, would find that ascent more than to her liking.

And he was right. She faced it and breasted it like the lion-hearted animal she was, but the loose sandy surface, and the abruptness of the incline, first brought her to a series of plunges, and finally to her knees and a dead halt.

And Tresler was out of the saddle in an instant, and drew the reins over her head, while she, now quite subdued, struggled to her feet. She was utterly blown, and her master was little better. They stood together on that hillside and rested.

Now the man had a full view of the river below, and he realized the jump that the mare had made. And, further down, he beheld an astonishing sight. At a point where the course of the river narrowed, a rough bridge of pine-logs had been thrown across it. He stood for some minutes contemplating the scene and busy with his thoughts, which at last culminated in a question uttered aloud—

“Where on earth does it lead to?”

And he turned and surveyed the point, where, higher up, the trail vanished round the hillside above him. The question voiced a natural curiosity which he promptly proceeded to satisfy. Linking his arm through the reins, he led the mare up the hill.

It was a laborious climb. Even free of her burden the horse had difficulty in keeping her feet. The sandy surface was deep, and poured away at every step like the dry sand on the seashore. And as they laboured up, Tresler's wonder increased at every step. Why had such a trail been made, and where—where could it lead to?

At length the vanishing-point was reached, and horse and rider rounded the bend. And immediately the reason was made plain. But even the reason sank into insignificance before the splendour of the scene which presented itself.

He was standing on a sort of shelf cut out of the hillside. It was not more than fifty yards long and some twenty wide, but it stood high over a wide, far-reaching valley, scooped out amongst the great foothills which reared their crests about

him on every side. Far as the eye could see was spread out the bright, early summer green of the grassland hollow. For the most part the surrounding hills were precipitate, and rose sheer from the bed of the valley, but here and there a friendly landslide had made the place accessible. Just where he stood, and all along the shelf, the face of the hill formed a precipice, both above and below, and the only approach to it was the way he had come round from the other side of the hill.

And the object, the reason, of that hidden road. A small hut crushed into the side of the sheer cliff. A dugout of logs, and thatch, and mud plaster. A hut with one fronting door, and a parchment window ; a hut such as might have belonged to some old-time trapper, who had found it necessary to set his home somewhere secure from the attacks of marauding Indians.

And what a strategic position it was ! One approach to be barred and barricaded ; one laborious road which the besieged could sweep with his rifle-fire, and beat back almost any horde of Indians in the country. He led his horse on towards the hut. The door was closed, and the parchment of the window hid the interior.

The outside appearance showed good repair. He examined it critically. He walked round its three sides, and, as he came to the far side of it, and thoughtfully took in the method of its construction, he suddenly became aware of another example of the old trapper's cunning. The cliff that rose sheer up for another two or three hundred feet slightly sloped backwards at the extremity of the shelf, and here had been cut a rude sort of staircase in the grey limestone of which it was composed. There were the steps, dangerous enough, and dizzying to look at, rising up, up, to the summit above. He ventured to the brink where they began, but instantly drew back. Below was a sheer drop of perhaps five hundred feet.

Turning his eyes upwards, his fancy conjured up a picture of the poor wretch, hunted and besieged by the howling Indians, starving perhaps, creeping at dead of night from the

little fort he had held so long and so valiantly against such overwhelming odds, and, in desperation, availing himself of his one and only possible escape. Step by step, he followed him, in imagination, up the awful cliff, clinging for dear life with fingers worn and lacerated by the grinding stone. Weary and exhausted, he seemed to see him draw near the top. Then a slip, one slip of his tired feet, and no hold upon the limestone with his hands would have power to save him. Down, down——

He turned back to the hut with a sick feeling in his stomach. Securing his mare to an iron ring, which he found driven firmly into one of the logs, he proceeded to investigate further. The door was held by a common latch, and yielded at once when he raised it. It opened inwards, and he waited after throwing it open. He had a strange feeling of trespass in thus intruding upon what might prove to be the home of some fur hunter.

No sound followed the opening of the door. He waited listening; then at last he stepped forward and announced himself with a sharp "Hello!"

His only answer was the echo of his greeting. Without more ado he stepped in. For a moment the sharpness of the contrast of light made it impossible for him to see anything; but presently he became used to the twilight of the interior, and looked about him curiously. It was his first acquaintance with a dugout, nor was he impressed with the comfort it displayed. The place was dirty, unkempt, and his dream of the picturesque, old-time trapper died out entirely. He beheld walls bare of all decoration, simply a rough plastering of mud over the lateral logs; a frowsy cupboard, made out of a huge packing-case, containing odd articles for house-keeping purposes. There were the fragments of two chairs lying in a heap beside a dismembered table, which stood only by the aid of two legs and the centre post which supported the pitch of the roof. A rough trestle-bed occupied the far end of the hut, and in shape and make it reminded him of his own bed in the

bunkhouse. But there the resemblance ended, for the palliasse was of brown sacking, and a pair of dull-red blankets were tumbled in a heap upon its foot. Some more blanket of similar hue was lying upon the floor; but this was only a torn fragment that had possibly served as a carpet, or, to judge by other fragments lying about, had been used to patch shirts, or even the well-worn bedclothes.

It was a squalid hovel, and reeked of the earth out of which it was dug. Beyond the bedding, the red blankets, and the few plates and pots in the packing-case cupboard, there was not a sign of the owner, and Tresler found himself wondering as to what manner of man it was who could have endured such meanness. It did not occur to him that probably the very trapper he had thought of had left his eyrie in peace and taken his belongings with him, leaving behind him only those things which were worthless.

A few minutes satisfied his curiosity. Probably his ride, and a natural desire to return to the ranch as quickly as possible, had dulled the keenness of his faculties of observation. Certain it is that, squalid as the place was, there was an air of recent habitation about it that he missed. He took it for a deserted shack merely, and gave it no second thought.

He passed out into the daylight with an air of relief; he had seen quite enough. The Lady Jezebel welcomed him with an agitated snort; she too seemed anxious to get away. He led her down the shelving trail again. The descent was as laborious as the ascent had been, and much more dangerous. But it was accomplished at last, and at the foot of the hill he mounted the now docile animal, who cantered off as amiably as though she had never done anything wrong in her life.

And as he rode away his thoughts reverted to the incidents of that morning; he went again over the scenes in which he had taken part, the scenes he had witnessed. He thought of his brief battle with Jake, of Diane and Joe, of his interview with Sergeant Fyles. All these things were of such vital

import to him that he had no thought for anything else; even the log bridge spanning the river could not draw from him any kind of interest. Had his mind been less occupied, he might have paused to ask himself a question about the things he had just seen. He might even have wondered how the logs of that dugout had been hauled to the shelf on which it stood. Certain it was that they must have been carried there, for there was not a single tree upon the hillside, only a low bush. And the bridge; surely it was the work of many hands. And why was it there on a disused trail?

But he had no thought for such questions just then. He hustled the mare and hurried on.

CHAPTER XI

THE TRAIL OF THE NIGHT-RIDERS

A WEEK passed before Tresler was again brought into contact with Jake. When he got back from his ride into the foothills, the "broncho-busting" carnival was in full swing; but he was fated to have no share in it. Jacob Smith was waiting for him with a message from Julian Marbolt; his orders were peremptory. He was to leave at once for Calford, to make preparations for the reception of the young horses now being broken for the police. The rancher made his meaning quite plain. And Tresler was quick to understand that this was simply to get him out of the way until such time as Jake's temper had cooled and the danger of a further rupture was averted.

He received his instructions without comment. It was rough on his mare, but as the Lady Jezebel was fond of giving hard knocks, she must not mind if she received a similar treatment in return. And so he went, much to the disquiet of Joe Nelson, and with a characteristic admonition from Arizona. That individual had just finished thrashing a bull-headed young broncho with a quirt, because he wouldn't move from the spot where he had been saddled, when Tresler came up. The lean man was breathing hard as he rested, and he panted his farewell huskily.

"Kep y'r gun good an' handy," he said. "Et's mighty good company, if et don't git gassin' wi'out you ast it a question."

In this case, however, there was no need for the advice,

The journey was a peaceful relief after the storms of Mosquito Bend. Tresler transacted his business, the horses arrived, were delivered to the authorities, and he witnessed the police methods of dealing with their remounts, which was a wonderful example of patience and moderation. Then he set out for the ranch again, in company with Raw Harris and Lew Cawley—the two men who had brought the band into the town.

His return to Mosquito Bend was very different from his first coming. It seemed to him as if a lifetime had passed since he had been ridiculed about his riding-breeches by all who met him. So much had happened since then. Now he was admittedly a full-blown prairie man, with much to learn, perhaps, but garbed like the other cowpunchers with him, in moleskin and buckskin, Mexican spurs, and slouch hat; his gun belt slantwise on his hips, and his leather chapps creaking as he rode. He was no longer "the guy with the pants" he had been when he first entered the land of cattle, and somehow he felt glad at the metamorphosis. It brought him nearer to the land, which, with all its roughness, he felt to be the true life for him.

It was evening; the sun had not yet set, but it was dipping low over the western hills, casting long shadows from behind the gorgeous-coloured heat clouds. Its dying lustre shone like a fire of molten matter through the tree-tops, and lit the forest-crowned hills, until the densest foliage appeared like the most delicate fretwork of Nature's own cutting. And in the shadow cast by the hilly background there nestled the ranch, overlooking its vast, wide-spreading pastures of succulent grass.

Yes, Tresler was glad to be back to it all, no matter what the future might hold for him. He had missed his companions; he had missed Arizona, with his fierce, untamed spirit; he had missed Joe, with his quaint face and staunch heart; but more than all, he had longed to get back to Diane, looking forward to the greeting she would extend him as only a lover can. But there was something more in his longing than that. Every day he had been away he had fretted and

chafed at the thought of what might be happening to her. Joe was there to send him word, but even this was insufficient. There had been times when he felt that he could not stay to finish the work put upon him; there had been times when his patience utterly gave way before the nervous tension of his feelings, and he had been ready to saddle his mare and offer her a race against time back to the girl he loved.

His feelings were stirred to their very depths as he came up the trail from the ford. He had no words for either of his companions, nor did they seem inclined for speech. They passed the corrals in silence and reached the bunkhouse, where several of their comrades greeted them with a nod or a casual "Hello!" They might have just returned from a day's work on the range for all the interest displayed at their coming. But, then, effusiveness is no part of the cowboy's manner. There is rarely a "good-bye" on the prairie, unless it is when a comrade "hits the one way trail." Even then it is more often a quiet "s'long," without any demonstrativeness, but which may mean far more than a flood of tears.

Jake was at his door when Tresler rode over to report. He was still bearing the marks of the quirt on his face, and the author of them beheld his handiwork with some qualms of regret. However, there was none of this in his manner as he made his report. And, much to his astonishment, Jake displayed a cold civility. He surpassed himself. Not a sneer or sarcasm passed his lips. The report done, he went on to the barn and stabled his mare for the night. Then he passed on towards his quarters.

Before he reached his destination, however, he was joined by Nelson. The little man had evidently been waiting for him.

"Well?"

There was no greeting. Tresler put his monosyllabic question at once. And the choreman responded without hesitation.

"She's bin astin' fer you three times. When was you gittin' around agin? I guessed I didn't know fer sure. She was kind o' worried, I reckon." He paused, and his twisted

face turned in the direction of the foreman's hut. "She wus weepin' last night," he went on. Then he paused again, and his shrewd eyes came back to Tresler's face. "She's bin weepin' to-day," he said, with a peculiar look of expectation in his manner.

"What's the trouble?" The question came short and sharp.

"Mebbe she's lonesome."

"That's not it; you've got other reasons."

Joe looked away again. "Jake's bin around some. But I guess she's lonesome too. She's ast fer you." The little man's tone was full of obstinacy.

Tresler understood his drift. If Joe had his way he'd march Diane and him off to the nearest parson with no more delay than was required to saddle two horses.

"I'm going to see her to-night," Tresler replied quietly. Then, as he saw Jake appear again in the doorway, he said, "You'd better pass on now. Maybe I'll see you afterwards."

And Joe moved off without another word. Jake had seen them together, but he was unsuspecting. He was thinking of the scars on his face, and of something else that had nothing to do with their meeting. And his thoughts made him smile unpleasantly.

If Tresler's first greeting had been indifferent, his reception, as he came over to the bunkhouse now, was far from being so. Talk flowed freely, inquiries hailed him on every side; jests passed, sometimes coarse, sometimes subtle, but always cordial. All the men on the ranch had a fair good-will for him. 'Tenderfoot' he might be, but they approved his grit, and with frontiersmen grit is all that matters.

After supper he separated himself from his companions under pretext of cleaning his saddlery. He hauled a bucket of water, and went down to the lower corrals and disposed his accoutrements for the operation, but he did no work until he saw Arizona approaching. That unkempt personage

loafed up in a sort of manner that plainly said he didn't care if he came or not. But Tresler knew this was only his manner. The cleaning of the saddle now proceeded with assiduity, and Arizona sat himself down on a fallen log and spat tobacco-juice around him. At last he settled himself, nursing one knee in his clasped hands, and spoke with that air of absolute conviction which always characterized him.

"Say, Jake's grittin' his teeth tight," he said. Then, as an afterthought, "But he ain't showin' 'em."

Tresler looked up and studied the 'cadaverous face before him.

"You mean—about——"

"Wal, I was jest figgerin' on how you was standin'. Seems likely you're standin' lookin' east wi' a feller due west who's got the drop on yer; which, to my reckonin', ain't as safe as handin' trac's to a lodge o' Cheyenne neche's on the war-path."

"You think that Jake's quietly getting the drop on me?"

"Wal, I allow ef I was Jake I'd be gettin' a'mighty busy that way. An' I kind o' calc'late that's wot he's doin'."

Tresler smiled and returned to his work. "And what form do you think his 'drop' will take?" he asked, without looking up.

"I ain't gifted wi' imagination. Y'ain't never sure which way a blind mule's likely ter kick. Jake's in the natur' of a blind mule. What I sez is, watch him. Don't look east when he's west. Say," he went on, in a tone of disgust, "you Britishers make me sick. Ther' ain't nothin' ter hittin' a feller an' makin' him sore. It on'y gives him time to git mad. A gun's handy an' sudden. On'y you need a goodish bore ef you're goin' ter perf'rate the hide of a guy like Jake. Pshaw!" he finished up witheringly, "you fellers ain't got shut o' last century."

"Maybe we haven't," Tresler retorted, with a good-humoured laugh; "but the enterprise of your nation has carried you so far ahead of time that you've overlapped. I

tell you, man, you're back in the savage times. You're groping in the prehistoric periods—Jurassic, Eocene, or some such."

"Guess I ain't familiar wi' Jurassics an' Eocenes," Arizona replied gravely. "Mebbe that was before my time; but ef you're speakin' o' they fellers as clumped each other over the head wi' stone clubs, I 'lows they had more savvee than a Britisher, ef they wus kind o' primitive in ther' habits."

Tresler accepted the argument in the spirit in which it was put forward. It was no use getting angry. Arizona was peculiar, but he had reason to consider him, in his own parlance, "a decent citizen." He went on with his work steadily while the cowpuncher grunted out his impatience. Then at last, as though it were forced from him, the latter jerked out a more modified opinion of the English as a race. It seemed as though Tresler's very silence had drawn it from him.

"Wal," he said grumbly, "mebbe you Britishers has points—mebbe, I sez." Then he dismissed the subject with an impatient shrug of his drooping shoulders, and went off at a fresh angle. "Say, I wus kind o' wonderin' some 'bout that flea-bitten shadder, Joe Nelson. He's amazin' queer stayin' 'round here. He's foxin' some, too. Y'ain't never sure when you're like to strike them chewed-up features o' his after nightfall. Y'see he's kind o' quit drinkin'—leastways, he's frekent sober. Mebbe he can't sleep easy. Ther's suthin' worritin' his head, sure. He 'pears ter me desp'rate restless—kind o' like an old hoss wi' the bush-ticks. Et don't fit noways wi' the Joe Nelson I oncet knew. Mebbe it's religion. Ther' ain't nuthin' like religion fer makin' things oneasy in your head. Joe allus had a strain o' religion in him."

The southerner gazed gloomily at the saddle on the fence, while he munched his tobacco in thoughtful silence.

"I don't think Joe's got religion," said Tresler, with a smile. "He's certainly worried, and with reason. Jake's got his knife into him. No, I think Joe's got a definite object in

staying around here, and I shouldn't wonder if he's clever enough to attain it, whatever it is."

"That sounds more like Joe," assented the other, cheering up at the suggestion. "Still, Joe allus had a strain o' religion in him," he persisted. "I see him drop a man in his tracks oncet, an' cry like a noo-born babby 'cos ther' wa'an't a chu'ch book in Lone Brake Settlement, an' he'd forgot his prayers, an' had ter let the feller lie around fer the coyotes, instead o' buryin' him decent. That's awhile ago. Guess Lone Brake's changed some. They do say ther's a Bible ther' now. Kind o' roped safe to the desk in the meetin'-house, so the boys can't git foolin' wi' it. Yup," he went on, with an abstracted look in his expressive eyes, "religion's a mighty powerful thing when it gits around. Most like the fever. I kind o' got touched wi' it down Texas way on the Mexican border. Guess et wer' t' do wi' a lady I favoured at the time; but that ain't here nor there. Guess most o' the religion comes along o' the wimmin folk. 'Longside o' wimmin men is muck."

Tresler nodded his appreciation of the sentiment.

"Gettin' religion's most like goin' on the bust. Hits yer sudden, an' yer don't git off'n it easy. The signs is allus the same. You kind o' worry when folks gits blasphemmin', an' you don't feel like takin' a hand to help 'em out. You hate winnin' at 'draw,' an' talks easy when a feller holds 'fours' too frekent. An' your liquor turns on your stummick. They're all signs," he added expansively. "When a feller gits like that he'd best git right off to the meetin'-house. That's how I tho't."

"And you went?"

"That's so. Say, an' it ain't easy. I 'lows my nerve's pretty right fer most things, but when you git monkeyin' wi' religion it's kind o' different. 'Sides, ther's allus fellers ter choke you off. Nassy Wilkes, the s'loon-keeper, he'd had religion bad oncet, tho' I 'lows he'd fergot most o't sence he'd been in the s'loon biz; he kind o' sceered me some. Sed

they used a deal o' water, an' mostly got ducking greenhorns in it. Wal, I put ha'f a dozen slugs o' whisky down my neck—which he sed would prevent me gittin' cold, seein' water wa'an't in my line—an' hit the trail fer the meetin'."

"What denomination?" asked Tresler, curiously. "What religion?" he added, for the man's better understanding.

"Wal, I don't rightly knows," Arizona went on gravely. "I kind o' fancy the boys called 'em 'dippers'; but I guess this yarn don't call fer no argyment," he added, with a suspicion of his volcanic temper rising at the frequent interruptions. Then, as the other kept silence, he continued in his earnest way, "Guess that meetin'-house wus mostly empty when I got. Ther' wus one feller ther' a'ready when I come. He wus playin' toons on a kind o' 'cordion he worked wi' his feet——"

"Harmonium," suggested Tresler, diffidently.

"That's it. I could a' wep' as I looked at that feller, he wus that noble. He'd long ha'r greased reg'lar, an' wore swaller-tails. Guess he wus workin' that concertina-thing like mad; an' he jest looked right up at the ceilin' as if he wer crazy fer some feller to come 'long an' stop him 'fore he bust up the whole shootin' match."

"Looked inspired," Tresler suggested.

"Mebbe that's wot. Still, I wus glad I come. Then the folks come along, an' the deac'n; an' the feller quit. Guess he wus plumb scart o' that deac'n, tho' I 'lows he wus a harmless lookin' feller 'nough. I see him clear sheer out o' range on sight, which made me think he wus a mean-sperrited cuss anyway.

"Yes, I guess I wus glad I'd come; I felt that easy an' wholesome. Say, the meetin's dead gut stuff. Yes, sir—dead gut. I felt I'd never handle a gun again; I couldn't a' blasphemed 'longside a babby ef you'd give me ten dollars to try. An' I guess ther' wa'an't no dirty Greaser as I couldn't ha' loved like a brother, I wus that soothed, an' peaceful, an' saft feelin'. I jest took a chaw o' plug, an' sat back an' watched

them folks lookin' so noble as they come along in ther' funeral kids an' white chokers. Then the deac'n got good an' goin', an' I got right on to the 'A-mens,' fetchin' 'em that easy I wished I'd never done nothin' all my life but git around that meetin' ! I set ther' feelin' real happy."

Arizona paused, and his wild eyes softened as his thoughts went back to those few happy moments of his unchequered career. Then he heaved a deep sigh of regret and went on—

"But it wa'an't to last. No, sir, religion ain't fer the likes o' me. Ye can't play the devil an' mix wi' angels. They're bound to out you. Et's on'y natteral. Guess I'd bin chawin' some, an' ther' wa'an't no spit boxes. That's wher' the trouble come. Ther' was a raw-boned cuss wi' his missis settin' on the bench front o' me, an' I guess her silk fixin's got mussed up wi' t'bacca juice someways. I see her look down on the floor, then she kind o' gathered her skirts aroun' her an' got wipin' wi' her han'k'chief. Then she looks aroun' at me, an', me feelin' friendly, I kind o' smiled at her, not knowin' she was riled. Then she got whisperin' to her wall-eyed galoot of a man, an' he turns aroun' smart, an' he sez, wi' a scowl, sez he, 'The meetin'-house ain't no place fer chawin' hunks o' plug, mister; wher' wus you dragged from?' Ther' wus a nasty glint to his eye. But ef he wus goin' to ferget we wus in the meetin'-house I meant showin' him I wa'an't. So I answers him perlite. Sez I, wi' a smile, 'Sir,' sez I, 'I take it we ain't from the same hog trough.' I see he took it mean, but as a feller got up from behind an' shouts 'Silence,' I guessed things would pass over. But that buzzard-headed mule wus cantankerous. He beckons the other feller over an' tells him I wus chawin', an' the other feller sez to me: 'You can't chaw here, mussin' up the lady's fixin's.'

"Wal, bein' on'y human, I got riled, but, not wishin' to raise a racket, I spat my chew out. I don't know how it come, but, I guess, bein' riled, I jest didn't take notice wher' I

dumped it, till, kind o' sudden-like, I found I wus inspectin' the vitals o' that side-show-freak's gun. Sez he, in a nasty tone, which kind o' interrupted the deac'n's best langwidge, an' made folks ferget to fetch the 'A-men' right, 'You dogone son of a hog——' But I didn't wait fer no more. I sees then what's amiss. My chaw had located itself on the lady's ankle—which I 'lows wus shapely—which she'd left showin' in gatherin' her fixin's aroun' her. I see that, an' I see his stove-pipe hat under the seat. I jest grabbed that hat sudden, an' 'fore he'd had time to drop his hammer I'd mushed it down on his head so he couldn't see. Then I ups, wi' the drop on him, an' I sez: 'Come right along an' we'll settle like honest cit'zens.' An' wi' that I backed out o' the meetin'. Wal, I guess he wus clear grit. We settled. I 'lows he wus a dandy at the bizness end o' a gun, an' I walked lame fer a month after. But ther' was a onattached widdy in that town when we'd done."

"You killed him?" Tresler asked.

"Wal, I didn't wait to ast no details. Guess I got busy fergittin' religion right off. Mebbe ther's a proper time fer ev'rything, an' I don't figger its reas'nable argyfyin' even wi' a deac'n when his swaller-tail pocket's bustin' wi' shootin' materials. No, sir, guess religion ain't no use fer me."

Arizona heaved a deep sigh of regret. Tresler gathered up his saddle and bridle. Once or twice he had been ready to explode with laughter during his companion's story, but the man's evident sincerity and earnestness had held him quiet; had made him realize that the story was in the nature of a confidence, and was told in no spirit of levity. And, somehow, now, at the end of it, he felt sorry for this wandering outcast, with no future and only a disreputable past. He knew there was far more real good in him than bad, and yet there seemed no possible chance for him. He would go on as he was; he would "punch" cattle so long as he could find employment. And when chance, or some other matter, should plunge him on his beam ends he would take to what most

cowboys in those days took to when they fell upon evil days—cattle stealing. And, probably, end his days dancing at the end of a lariat, suspended from the bough of some stout old tree.

As he moved to go, Arizona rose abruptly from his seat, and stayed him with a gesture.

"Guess I got side-tracked yarnin'. I wanted to tell you a few things that's bin doin' sense you've bin away."

Tresler stood.

"Say," the other went on at once, "ther's suthin' doin' thick 'tween Jake an' blind hulks. Savee? I heerd Jake an' Miss Dianny gassin' at the barn one day. She wus ther' gittin' her bit of a shoe fixed by Jacob—him allus fixin' her shoes for her when they needs it—an' Jake come along and made her go right in an' look at the new driver he was breakin' fer her. Guess they didn't see me, I wus up in the loft puttin' hay down. When they come in I was standin' takin' a chaw, an' Jake's voice hit me squar' in the lug, an' I didn't try not to hear what he said. An' I soon felt good that I'd held still. Sez he, 'You' best come out wi' me an' learn to drive her. She's dead easy.' An' Miss Dianny sez, sez she, 'I'll drive her when she's thoroughly broken!' An' he sez, 'You mean you ain't goin' out wi' me?' An' she answers short-like, 'No.' Then sez he, mighty riled, 'You shan't go out with that mare by yourself to meet no Treslers,' sez he. 'I'll promise you that. See? Your father's on to your racket, I've seen to that. He knows you an' him's bin sparkin', an' he's real mad. That's by the way,' he sez. 'What I want to tell you's this. You're goin' to marry me, sure. See? An' your father's goin' to make you.' An' Miss Dianny jest laffed right out at him. But her laff wa'an't easy. An', sez she, wi' mock 'nuff to make a man feel as mean as rank sow-belly, 'Father will never let me marry, and you know it.' An' Jake stands quiet a minnit. Then I guess his voice jest rasped right up to me through that hay-hole. 'I'm goin' to make him,' sez he, vicious-like. 'A

tidy ranch, this, eh? Wal, I tell you his money an' his stock an' his land won't help him a cent's worth ef he don't give you to me. I ken make him lick my boots if I so choose. See? Ther' wa'an't another word spoke. An' I heerd 'em move clear. Then I dropped, an' pushin' my head down through the hay-hole, I see that Jake's goin' out by hisself. Miss Dianny had gone out clear ahead, an' wus talkin' to Jacob."

"What do you think it means?" asked Tresler, quietly.

And in a moment the other shot off into one of his volcanic surprises.

"I ain't calc'latin' ther' meanin'. Say, Tresler," the man paused, and his great rolling eyes glanced furtively from right to left. Then he came close up and spoke in a harsh whisper. "It's got to be. He ain't fit to live. This is wot I wus thinkin'. I'll git right up to his shack, an' I'll call him every son-of-a—I ken think of. See? He'll git riled, an'—wal, I owe her a debt o' grat'tood, an' I can't never pay it no other ways, so I'll jest see my slug finds his carkis right, 'fore he does me in."

Arizona stepped back with an air of triumph. He could see no flaw in his plan. It was splendid, subtle.

It was the one and only way to settle all the problems centering round the foreman. Thus he would pay off a whole shoal of debts, and rid Diane of Jake for ever. And he felt positively injured when Tresler shook his head.

"You would pay her ill if you did that," he said gravely. "Jake was probably only trying to frighten her. Besides, he is her father's foreman. The man he trusts and relies on."

"You ain't got no savee," Arizona broke out in disgust. "Say, he won't need no foreman when Jake's out of the way. You'll marry the gal, an'——"

But he got no further. Tresler interrupted him coldly.

"That's enough, Arizona. We aren't going to discuss it further. In the meantime, believe me that I am wide awake to my position, and to Miss Marbolt's, and ready to do the

best for her in emergency. I must get on now, for I have several things to do before I turn in."

Arizona had no more to say. He relapsed into moody silence, and, as they moved away together, Tresler was thankful for the freakish chance that had made this man come to him with his plan before putting it into execution. It was dark now, and as they reached the bunkhouse they parted. Tresler deposited his saddle at the barn, but he did not return to the bunkhouse. He meant to see Diane before he turned in, by hook or by crook.

He knew that the time had come when he must actively seek to help her. When Jake openly threatened her, and she was found weeping, there was certainly need of that help. He was alarmed, seriously alarmed, and yet he hardly knew what it was he feared most. He quite realized the difficulties that confronted him. She had given him no right to interfere in her affairs. More, she would have every reason to resent such interference. But, in spite of this, he held to his resolve. It was his love that urged him on, his love that overbore his scruples, his gravest apprehensions. He told himself that he had the right which every man has. The right to woo and win for himself the love he covets. It was for Diane to say "yea" or "nay," not her father. There was no comfort she had been accustomed to, or even luxury, that he could not give her. There was no earthly reason why he should not try to win her. He vividly called to mind what Joe had suggested, and Arizona's unfinished sentence rang in his ears, but both suggestions as a basis of hope he set aside with a lover's egotism. What could these men know or understand of such a matter?

He had left the barn, and his way took him well out from the ranch yards in the direction of the pinewoods. He remembered his walk on his first night on the ranch, and meant to approach the back of the blind man's house by the same route.

The calm of the prairie night had settled upon the

ranch. The lowing of the cattle was hushed, the dogs were silent; and the voices of men, and the tramp of horses' hoofs were gone. There was only the harsh croaking of the frogs in the Mosquito River and the cry of the prowling coyote to disturb the peace of the summer night.

And as he walked, he felt for the first time something of the grip which sooner or later the prairie fixes upon those who seriously seek life upon its bosom. Its real fascination begins only when the first stages of apprenticeship to its methods and habits are passing. The vastness of its world, its silence, its profound suggestion of solitude, which ever remains even where townships and settlements exist, holds for man a fascination which appeals to the primitive senses and drags him back from the claims of civilization to the old, old life. And when that call comes, and the latent savage is roused from the depths of subjection, is it wonder that men yield to what, after all, is only the true human instinct—the right of the individual to defend itself from all attacks of foes? No; and so Tresler argued as he thought of the men who were his comrades.

Under the influence of his new feelings it seemed to him that life was so small a thing, on which folks of civilization set much too high a value. The ready appeal to the gun, which seemed to be one of the first principles of the frontiersman's life, was already beginning to lose its repugnance for him. After all, where no arbitration could be enforced, men still had a right to defend self and property.

His thoughts wandered on through a maze of argument which convinced him notwithstanding he told himself that it was all wrong. He told himself weakly that his thoughts were the result of the demoralizing influence of lawless associates, but, in spite of this, he felt that there was, in reality, something in them of a deeper, more abiding nature.

He had made the woodland fringe, and was working his way back towards the house. The darkness was profound here. The dense, sad-foliaged pines drooped their ponderous

boughts low about him as he passed, shielding him from all possible view from the ranch. And, even over the underlay of brittle cones, his moccasined feet bore him along in a silent, ghostly manner. It was the first time in his life he had been forced to steal upon anybody's house like a thief in the night; but he felt that his object was more than sufficient justification.

Now he looked keenly for any sign of lights among the ranch buildings. The bunkhouse was in darkness, but Jake's house was still lit up. However, this did not bother him much. He knew that the foreman was in the habit of keeping his lamp burning, even after retiring. Perhaps he read at night. The idea amused him, and he wondered what style of literature might appeal to a man of Jake's condition of mind. But even as he watched, the light went out, and he felt more satisfied.

He reached a point on the edge of the forest opposite the barn. Then something brought him up with a start. Some unusual sound had caught his ear. It was the murmur of voices in the distance. Immediately his mind went back to his first night on the ranch, and he remembered Red Mask and his attendant horseman. Now he listened, peering hard into the darkness in the direction of the house, at the point whence the sound was proceeding. Whoever were talking they seemed to be standing still. The sound grew no louder, nor did it die away. His curiosity drew him on; and, with cautious steps, he crept forward.

He tried to estimate how far the speakers were from the house. It seemed to him that they were somewhere in the neighbourhood of the rancher's private stable. But he could not be altogether sure.

Now, as he drew nearer, the voices became louder. He could distinctly hear the rise and fall of their tones, but still they were unrecognizable. Again he paused, this time for caution's sake only. He estimated that he was within twenty-five yards of the stable. It would not be safe to go further. The steady murmur that reached him was tantalizing. Under

ordinary circumstances he would have risked discovery and gone on, but he could not jeopardize his present object.

He stretched himself under the shelter of a low bush, and, strangely enough, recognized it as the one he had lain under on that memorable first night. This realization brought him a grim foreboding; he knew what he expected, he knew what was coming. And his foreboding was fulfilled within a few seconds of taking up his position.

Suddenly he heard a door close, and the voices ceased speaking. He waited almost breathlessly for the next move. It came. The crackling of pine cones under shod hoofs sounded sharply to his straining ears. It was a repetition of what had happened before. Two horsemen were approaching from the direction of the house. It was inevitable that his hand should go to his gun, and, as he realized his own action, he understood how surely the prairie instincts had claimed him. But he withdrew it quickly and waited, for he had no intention of taking action. It might be Red Mask. It probably was. But he had no intention of upsetting his present plans by any blind, precipitate attack upon the desperado. Besides, if Red Mask and Jake were one, then the shooting of him, in cold blood, in the vicinity of the ranch, would, in the eyes of the police, be murder. No story of his would convince a jury that the foreman of Mosquito Bend was a cattle rustler.

A moment later the horses dimly outlined themselves. There were two of them, as before. But he could not see well, the woods seemed darker than before; and, besides, they did not pass so near to him. They went on like ghostly, silent shadows, only the scrunch of the cones underfoot told of their solidity.

He waited until the sound died out, then he rose quietly and pursued his way. But what he had just witnessed plunged his thoughts into a moody channel. The night-riders were abroad again, riding unchecked upon their desperate way, over the trail of murder and robbery they cut for themselves wherever they went. He wondered with dread who was to be the victim to-night. He remembered Manson Orr and shuddered.

He had a bitter feeling that he had acted wrongly in letting them pass unchallenged in spite of what reason and a cool judgment told him. His duty had been to investigate, but he also thought of a sad-faced girl, friendless and alone, weeping her heart out in the midst of her own home. And somehow his duty faded out before the second picture. And, as though to further encourage him, the memory of Joe Nelson's words came to him suddenly, and continued to haunt him persistently.

"You'll jest round that gal up into your own corrals, an' set your own brand on her quick, eh?"

CHAPTER XII

THE RISING OF A SUMMER STORM

WHEN the horsemen had passed out of hearing, Tresler still exerted the utmost caution. He had yet to pass the blind man's room, and he knew that that individual's hearing was something bordering on the marvellous, and, he argued, he must still be up, or, at least, awake. So he moved on with the lightest tread, with every sense alert; watchful alike for every unusual sound or movement. At the stable he paused and gently tried the door. It was fast. He put his ear to it and listened, and was forced to be content with the rattle of the collar chains, and the sound of the heavy breathing-animals within. He would have liked to investigate further, for the noise of the shutting door, he knew, had come from the stable, but it behoved him to refrain. It would be worse than useless to rouse the man, Anton, who slept over the stable. And there was no other means of ascertaining what had been going on.

He crept on; and now the shadowy outline of the house itself shut him off from the ranch. He cleared the danger zone of the rancher's bedroom and reached the kitchen, where he met with a first disappointment. He was relieved and delighted to find that a light was still burning there; but his joy was dashed almost immediately by finding that the linen blind was down, and not a crack showed by which he could get a view of the room. He dared not go to the door until he had ascertained who was within, so he stood for a moment uncertain what to do. Then he suddenly remembered that the kitchen had

another window on the far side of the lean-to. It would mean passing out into the open again ; still, the darkness was such that the risk was reduced to a minimum.

With no further hesitation he hurried round. His only care now was to tread quietly, and even this seemed unnecessary, for the blind man's room was at the other side of the house, and, if his suspicions were correct, Jake was busy at his nocturnal trade. Fortune favoured him. The blind was down, but the lower sash of the window was raised, and he saw, that by pulling the linen on one side, he could obtain a full view of the room.

He was about to carry out his purpose. His hand was raised and reaching towards the window, when the sound of weeping came to him and checked his action. He stood listening for a second. Then, with a stifled ejaculation he thrust his hand out further, and caught the edge of the blind.

He paused for nothing now. He had no scruples. He knew without inquiry who it was that was weeping within ; who else but Diane could it be ? And at the sound of each choking sob, his heart was wrung, and he longed to clasp her in his arms and comfort her. This love of his which had taken its place so suddenly in his life thrilled through his body like a fiery torrent roused to fever heat by the sound of the girl's sobs.

Drawing the edge of the blind sharply on one side, he peered into the room. His worst fears were realized. Diane was at the far side of the kitchen sitting over the square cook-stove, rocking herself to and fro in an access of misery, and, in what seemed to him, an attitude of physical suffering. Her pretty head was bowed low upon her hands, and her whole frame was shaken by the sobs she was struggling hard to, but could not suppress.

He took all this in at a glance, then his eyes rested upon her arms. The sleeves of her dress had been unfastened, and were thrown back from her wrists, leaving them bare to the elbow. And he saw, to his horror and indignation, that the soft, rounded flesh of her forearm was swollen and bruised.

The sight made him clench his teeth, and his blue eyes suddenly hardened. He no longer permitted caution to govern his actions.

"Hist, Diane!" he whispered hoarsely. And he shook the stiff blind to further draw her attention. "It is I, Tresler," he went on urgently.

And the girl sprang from her seat instantly and faced the window. She dashed her hand across her eyes and hastily sought to readjust her sleeves. But the pitiful attempt to thus hide her trouble only made the signs more marked. The tears still flowed, in spite of her bravest manner, and no effort of hers was able to keep the sweet lips from quivering.

She took one step in the direction of the window, but drew up with such a violent start and expression of alarm in her tearful eyes, that Tresler peered all round the room for the cause. He saw nothing more startling than a slumbering cat and the fragments of a broken lamp upon the floor, and his eyes went back to her again. Then, as he marked her attitude of attention, he understood. She was listening for the familiar but ominous "tap, tap" of her father's stick. He too listened. Then, as no sound came to his straining ears, he spoke again.

"I must speak with you, Miss Diane," he whispered. "Open the back door."

It was only after making his demand that he realized how impossible it must have sounded to the distraught girl. It was the first time, since he had set out to see her, that it occurred to him how one-sided was the proposition. She had no knowledge of his resolve to thrust his aid upon her. He told himself that she could have no possible inkling of his feelings towards her; and he waited with no little anxiety for her response.

Nor was that response long in coming. She made another effort to dash the tears from her eyes. Then, half defiantly and half eagerly, she stepped up to the window.

"Go round to the door, quick!" she whispered, and moved

off again as though she stood in imminent peril as a consequence of her words.

And Tresler was round at the door and standing in the shadow of the water-barrel before the bolt was slipped back. Now, as the girl raised the latch and silently opened the door, he slid within. He offered no explanation, but simply pointed to the window.

"We must close that," he said in a low tone.

And Diane obeyed without demur. There was a quiet unobtrusive force about this man whenever his actions were directed into a definite channel. And Diane found herself complying without the least resentment, or even doubt as to the necessity for his orders. Now she came back to him, and raised a pair of trusting eyes to his face, and he, looking down into them, thought he had never gazed upon anything so sweetly pathetic; nor had he ever encountered anything quite so rousing as the implicit trust of her manner towards him. Whatever he had felt for her before, it was as nothing to the delicious sense of protection, the indefinable wave of responsibility, almost parental, that now swept over him. He felt that, come what may, she was his to cherish, to guard, to pilot through whatever shoals her life might hold for her. It was the effect of her simple womanly trust appealing to his manhood, unconsciously for her part, but nevertheless surely. Nor was that feeling only due to his love for her; it was largely the chivalrous instinct of a brave and strong man for a weak woman that filled his heart at that moment.

"There is a lot for us to talk about," he said. "A lot that others mustn't hear," he added thoughtfully.

"What others?" Diane asked anxiously.

Tresler deemed it best to avoid half measures, and answered with prompt decision—

"Your father, for one."

"Then," said Diane, steadying at once, "we had better close the door into the passage."

She suited the action to the word, and returned dry-eyed and calm.

"My father?" Her question was sharp; it was a demand.

Instead of answering her, Tresler pointed to the broken lamp on the floor.

"You have had an accident," he said, and his blue eyes compelled hers, and held them.

"Yes," she said, after the least possible hesitation. Then, not without a slight touch of resentment: "But you have not answered my question."

"I'll answer that later on. Let me go on in my own way."

The girl was impressed with the gravity of his manner. She felt uneasy too. She felt how impossible it would be to hide anything from this man, who, quiet yet kindly, could exercise so masterful an influence over her. And there was a good deal just now she would have liked to keep from him. While they were talking she drew the sleeves of her dress down over her bruised wrists. Tresler saw the action and called her attention to the blackened flesh she was endeavouring to hide.

"Another accident?" he asked. And Diane kept silence. "Two accidents, and—tears," he went on, in so gentle a tone that fresh tears slowly welled up into her eyes. "That is quite unlike you, Miss—Diane. One moment. Let me look." He reached out to take her hands, but she drew away from him. He shrugged his shoulders. "I wonder if it were an accident?" he said, his keen eyes searching her face. "It would be strange to bruise both wrists by—accident."

The girl held silent for awhile. It was evident that a struggle was going on in her mind. Tresler watched. He saw the indecision. He knew how sorely he was pressing his advantage. Yet he must do it, if he would carry out his purpose. He felt that he was acting the brute, but it was the only way. Every barrier must be swept aside. At last she threw her head back with an impatient movement, and a slight flush of anger tinged her cheeks.

"And what if it were no accident?"

"The bruises or the lamp?"

"Both."

"Then"—and Tresler's tone was keenly incisive—"it is the work of some cruelly disposed person. You would not wilfully bruise yourself, Diane," he moved nearer to her, and his voice softened wonderfully, "is there any real reason why you cannot trust me with the truth? May I not share something of your troubles? See, I will save you the pain of the telling. If I am right, do not answer me, and I shall understand. Your father has been here, and it was his doing—these things."

The anger had passed out of the girl's face, and her eyes, troubled enough but yielding, looked up into his.

"But how do you——?"

"Someone, we both know whom, has maliciously been talking to your father," Tresler went on, without heeding the interruption; "has been lying to him to prejudice him against me—us. And your father has accepted his tales without testing their veracity. Having done so, he has spoken to you. What has passed between you I do not know, nor shall I attempt to fathom. The result is more than sufficient for me. You are unhappy; you have been unusually unhappy for days. You have wept much, and now you bear signs of violence on your arms."

Diane averted her gaze, her head was bent, and her eyes were fixed upon the broken lamp.

"Shall I go on?" Tresler continued. "Shall I tell you the whole story? Yes, I had better."

Diane nodded without looking at him.

"You know most of it, but you may not have looked at it quite in the same way that I do." His tone was very low, there was a great depth of earnestness in it. "We are all in the midst of a foul conspiracy, and that conspiracy it is for us to break up. Your father is threatened. You know it. And you are threatened with marriage to a rascal that should be wiped off the face of the earth. And this is the work of one man whom we believe to be the scourge of the countryside;

whom we call Red Mask or Jake Harnach, according to when and where we meet him. Now, is this all to go on without protest? Will you submit? is your father to be victimized?"

The girl shook her head.

"No," she said. Then with a sudden burst of passion she went on, only keeping her voice low by the greatest effort. "But what can we do? I have warned father. He has been told all that you have told me. He laughed. And I grew angry. Then he grew angry, too. And—and these things are the result. Oh, he hates you because he believes Jake's stories. And he scorns all my accusations against Jake, and treats me worse than some silly, tattling servant girl. How can we do anything?"

It was that last question that set fire to the powder-train. She had coupled herself with him, and Tresler, seeking only the faintest loophole, jumped at the opportunity it afforded him. His serious face softened. A slow, gentle smile crept into his eyes, and Diane was held by their caressing gaze.

"We can do something. We are going to do something," he said. "Not singly, but together; you and I."

There was that in his manner that made the girl droop her eyelids. There was a warmth, a light in his eyes he had never permitted her to see before, and her woman's instinct set her heart beating fast, so fast that she trembled and fidgeted nervously.

"Diane," he went on, reaching out and quietly taking possession of one of her hands, and raising it till the bared wrist displayed the cruel bruise encircling it, "no man has a right to lay a hand upon a woman to give her pain. A woman has a right to look to her men-folk to protect her, and when they fail her, she is indeed in sore straits. This," touching the bruises with his finger, "is the work of your father, the man of all who should protect you. You are sadly alone, so much alone that I cannot see what will be the end of it—if it is allowed to go on. Danny, I love you, and I want you, henceforward, to let me be your protector. You will need

some whole-hearted support in the future. I can see it. And you can see it, too. Say, tell me, little girl, fate has pitched us together in a stormy sea, surely it is for me to aid you with all the loving care and help I can bestow. Believe me, I am no idle boaster. I do not even say that my protection will be worth as much as that of our faithful old Joe, but, such as it is, it is yours, whether you take me with it or no, for as long as I live."

Diane had had time to recover from her first embarrassment. She knew that she loved this man; knew that she had done so almost from the very first. He was so different from the men she had known about the ranch. She understood, and acknowledged without shame, the feeling that had prompted her first warning to him. She knew that ever since his coming to the ranch he had hardly ever been out of her thoughts. She had never attempted to deceive herself about him. All she had feared was that she might, by some chance act, betray her feelings to him, and so earn his everlasting contempt. She was very simple and single-minded. She had known practically no association with her sex. Her father, who had kept her a willing slave by his side all her life, had seen to that. And so she had been thrown upon her own resources, with the excellent result that she had grown up with a mind untainted by any worldly thought. And now, when this man came to her with his version of the old, old story, she knew no coquetry, knew how to exercise no coyness or other blandishment. She made no pretence of any sort. She loved him, so what else was there to do but tell him so.

"Joe has been my faithful protector for years, Mr. Tresler," she replied, her sweet round face blushing and smiling as she raised it to him, "and I know his value and goodness. But—but I'd sooner have you—ever so much."

And of her own accord she raised her other hand to his and placed it trustfully within his only too willing clasp. But this was not sufficient for Tresler. He reached out and took her in his powerful arms and drew her to his breast. And

when he released her there were tears again in her eyes, but they were tears of happiness.

"And now, sweetheart, we must be practical again," he said. "If I am to be your protector, I must not allow my inclination to interfere with duty. Some day, when you are my wife, we shall be able to look back on this time and be proud of our restraint. Just now it is hard. It is a moment for kisses and happy dreams, and these things are denied us——"

He broke off and started as the flutter of the linen blind behind him drew his attention.

"I thought you shut the window," he said sharply.

"I thought I did; perhaps I didn't quite close it."

Diane was about to move over to investigate, but Tresler restrained her.

"Wait."

He went instead. The window was open about six inches. He closed and bolted it, and came back with a smile on his face that in no way deceived the girl.

"Yes, you left it open," he said.

And Diane's reply was an unconvinced "Ah!"

"Now let us be quick," he went on. "Jake may threaten and bully, but he can do nothing to really hurt you. You are safe from him. For, before anything can possibly happen—I mean to you—I shall be on hand to help you. Joe is our watch-dog, asking his pardon. You can take heart in the thought that you are no longer alone. But developments are imminent, and I want you to watch your father closely, and endeavour to ascertain Jake's attitude towards him. This is my fear—that Jake may put some nefarious scheme, as regards him, into operation; such schemes as we cannot anticipate. He may even try to silence me, or make me ineffective in some way before such time comes along. He may adopt some way of getting rid of me——"

"What way?" There was a world of fear and anxiety in Diane's question, and she drew up close to him as though she would protect him with her own frail body.

Tresler shrugged. "I don't know. But it doesn't matter; I have my plans arranged. The thing that is of more importance is the fact that the night-riders are abroad again. I saw them on my way here. At the same spot where I saw them before. This time I shall not conceal my knowledge of the fact."

"You mean you will tell Jake—to his face?"

Diane gave a little gasp, and her beautiful eyes fixed themselves apprehensively upon his. They had in their depths a soft look of admiration, in spite of her anxiety and fear. But Tresler saw nothing of that. He took her question seriously.

"Certainly; it is my only means of getting into line of battle. By this means I shall make myself the centre of open attack—if all our surmises be true. It is getting late and I must go. I want to witness the return of the ruffians."

A silence fell. The man had said it was time for him to go, but he found it hard to tear himself away. He wanted to say so much to her; he wanted to ask her so much. Diane, half shyly, came a step nearer to him, and, though her face was smiling bravely, a pucker wrinkled her brows.

"Mr. Tresler——"

"I was christened 'John.'"

"John, then." The girl blushed faintly as she pronounced the name, which, spoken by her, seemed to seal the bond between them. "Is it absolutely necessary to tell Jake? Is it absolutely necessary to put yourself in such peril? Couldn't you——"

But she got no further. Her lover's arms were about her in an instant. He caught her to him in a great embrace and kissed her pleading, upturned face.

"Yes, yes, yes, child. It is absolutely necessary. No, you can't go yet," as she struggled feebly to free herself. "I ought to leave you now, yet I can hardly tear myself away. I have heaps to ask you: about yourself, your life, your father. I want to learn all there is in your little head, in your heart, little girl. I want to make our bond of love one of perfect

sympathy and understanding of each other ; of trust and confidence. It is necessary. We come together here with storm-clouds gathering on our horizon ; with the storm actually breaking. We come together under strange and unusual circumstances, and must fight for this love of ours. Ours will be no flower-strewn path. This much I have fully realized ; but it only makes me the more determined to see it through quickly. We have to fight—good. We will be early in the field. Now good-night, sweetheart. God bless you. Trust to me. Whatever I do will be done after careful deliberation ; with a view to our common goal. If I am wrong, so much the worse. I will do all that it is given me to do. And, last, remember this. Should anything happen to me, you have two friends who will never let Jake marry you. They are Joe and Arizona. Now, good-bye again.”

“ But nothing will happen to you—Jack ? ”

Every vestige of independence, every atom of the old self-reliance had gone from the girl's manner. She clung to him, timid, loving, a gentle, weak woman. Her whole soul was in her appeal and the look she bestowed.

“ I hope not. Courage, little woman. I remember the white dress, the sad, dark little face beneath the straw sun-hat of the girl that knew no fear when two men held thoughts of slaying each other, and were almost in the act of putting them into execution. You must remember her too.”

“ You are right, Jack. I will be brave and help you, if I can. Good-bye.”

They kissed once more, and Tresler hurried from the room with the precipitancy of a man who can only hold to his purpose by an ignominious flight from temptation.

Outside the door he paused, turned, and closed it carefully after him. And then he listened intently. He had in no way been deceived by the window business. He knew, as Diane knew, that she had closed it. Some hand from outside had opened it ; and he wondered whose had been the hand, and what the purpose.

When he passed out of the kitchen, the whole aspect of the night had changed. There was not a star visible, and the only light to guide him was that which shone through the window. He waited while Diane bolted the door, then, as nothing appeared to cause him alarm, he moved off. He had to pass round the shed where Joe slept. This was an addition to the kitchen, and quite shut off from the house. He groped his way along the wall of it till he came to the door, which stood open. He was half inclined to go in and rouse the little choreman. He felt that he would like to tell his old friend of his luck, his happiness. Then it flashed through his mind that, seeing the door was open, Joe might still be abroad. So he contented himself with listening for the sound of his breathing. All was still within ; his conjecture was right. Joe had not yet turned in.

He was puzzled. Where was Joe, and what was he doing at this hour of the night ?

He moved on slowly now. His thoughts were fully occupied. He was not the man to let a single detail pass without careful analysis. And the matter was curious. Especially in conjunction with the fact of the open window. He attributed no treachery to Joe, but the thing wanted explanation. He rounded the building, and as he did so understood the change in the weather. A sharp gust of wind took him, and he felt several drops of rain splash upon his face. A moment later a flash of lightning preceded a distant rumble of thunder.

He quickened his pace and drew out into the open, leaving the shadow of the woods behind him as he turned towards the ranch buildings. The light in the kitchen had been put out. Evidently Diane had already gone to bed. He stepped out briskly, and a moment later another flash of lightning revealed the window close beside him. He mechanically stretched out a hand and felt along the sill. It was tightly closed all right. A crash of thunder warned him of the quick-rising summer storm that was upon him, and the rain was coming down with that ominous solidity which portends a real, if brief, deluge.

He started at a run. A drenching at that hour was unpleasant to contemplate. He had intended witnessing the return of the night-riders, but, under the circumstances, that was now out of the question.

He had only gone a few paces when he brought up to a stand. Even amidst the noisy splashing of the rain, he thought he heard the sound of running feet somewhere near by; so he stood listening with every nerve straining. Then the promised deluge came and drowned every other sound. It was no use waiting longer, so he hurried on towards his quarters.

A dozen strides further on and the sky was split from end to end with a fork of lightning, and he was brought to a dead halt by the scene it revealed. It was gone in an instant, and the thunder crashed right above him. He had distinctly seen the figures of two men running. One was running towards him, and, curiously enough, the other was running from his left rear. And yet he had seen them both. Utterly heedless of the rain now, he waited for another flash. There was something strange doing, and he wished to fathom the mystery.

The duration of the storm was only a matter of a few minutes. It seemed to have spent itself in one flash of lightning and one peal of thunder. The second flash was long in coming. But at last a hazy sheet of white light shone for a second over the western sky revealing the ghostly shadow of a man coming at him, bearing in his upraised hand some heavy weapon of offence. He leapt to avoid the blow. But he was too late. The weapon descended, and, though he flung his arms out to protect himself, the darkness foiled him, and a crushing blow on the head felled him to the ground. And as he fell, some great noise roared in his ears, or so it seemed, and echoed and re-echoed through his head. Then he knew no more.

All sound was lost in the deluge of rain. The sky was unrelieved by any further flashes of light for many minutes. Then, at last, one came. A weak, distant lighting up of the clouds overhead, but it was sufficient to show the outstretched

form of the stricken man lying with his white face staring up at the sky. Also it revealed a shadowy figure bending over him. There was no face visible, no distinct outline of form. And this figure was moving, and appeared to be testing the lifeless condition of the fallen man.

Half an hour later the rain ceased, but the water was still racing down the hill in little trickling rivulets towards the ranch buildings. And as rapidly as the storm had come up so the sky cleared. Again the stars shone out and a faint radiance dimly outlined the scene of the attack.

Within fifty yards of the rancher's house Tresler was still stretched out upon the ground, but now a different figure was bending over him. It was a well-defined figure this time, a familiar figure. A little man with a grey head and a twisted face.

It was Joe Nelson trying, by every rough art his prairie life had taught him, to restore animation and consciousness in his friend. For a long time his efforts were unavailing, the task seemed hopeless. Then, when the little man had begun to fear the very worst, his patient suddenly moved and threw out his legs convulsively. Once the springs of life had been set in motion, the hardy constitution asserted itself, and, without further warning, Tresler sat bolt upright and stared about him wonderingly. For a few seconds he sat thus, then, with a movement of intense agony, one hand went up to his head.

"My God! What's the matter with me? My head!"

He slowly rocked himself for a brief spell; then, with another start, he recognized his friend, and, with an effort, sprang to his feet.

"Joe!" he cried. Then he reeled and would have fallen but for the supporting arm about his waist.

"You wer' nigh 'done up.' Say, I wus kind o' rattled. I'd shaddered that feller fer an hour or more, an' then lost him. Gee!" And there was an infinite expression of disgust in the exclamation.

"Him! Who?"

"Ther's on'y one feller around here hatin' you fit to murder, I guess."

"You mean—Jake?" asked Tresler, in a queer tone.

"Sure," was the emphatic reply.

"But, Joe, I saw the night-riders go out to-night. Not more than half an hour before the storm came on."

The little man made no answer, but quietly urged his patient forward in the direction of the bunkhouse.

CHAPTER XIII

THE BEARDING OF JAKE

THAT night was one that lived long in Tresler's memory. Weary in mind and body, he was yet unable to sleep when at last he sought his bunk. His head was racked with excruciating pain, which hammered through his brain with every pulsation of his throbbing temples. But it was not that alone which kept him awake. Thought ran riot with him, and his mind flew from one scene to another without concentration, without continuity, until he felt that if sleep did not come he must go mad.

He had talked late into the night with his shrewd counsellor, Joe; and the nett result of their talk was that all their theories, suspicions, deductions, were wrong. Jake and Red Mask were not one and the same. In all probability Jake had nothing to do with the ruffianly raider.

They were driven to this ultimate conclusion by the simple fact that while Tresler had been witnessing the movements of the masked night-rider, Joe had been zealously dogging the footsteps of the foreman in the general interests of his mistress. And that individual's footsteps had never once taken him to the rancher's private stable.

Jake had evidently been out on the spy himself. Of this Joe was certain, for the man had scoured the woods in the direction of the river; he had watched the trail from the rancher's stable for nearly half an hour; he had crept up to the verandah of the house under cover of the darkness, seeking

Joe knew not what, but always on the alert, always with the unmistakable patience of a man by no means new to such a task. Once Joe had missed him in the woods. Somehow, like a gigantic shadow, Jake had contrived to give him the slip. And this, on comparing notes, the two friends found coincided with the time of the episode of the unclosed window. Doubtless he had been the author of that matter. They made up their minds that he had witnessed the scene in the kitchen, which, of course, accounted for his later dastardly attack. Who had Jake been out looking for? What was the object of his espionage? Had he been looking for him, Tresler, or some one else? And herein lay the mystery. Herein, perhaps, lay the key to the greater problem they sought to solve.

Hour after hour Tresler lay awake, lost in a confusion of thought which refused his best efforts to straighten out. The acuteness of the pain in his head set his mind almost wandering. And he found himself aimlessly reviewing the events since his coming to Mosquito Bend. He tossed wearily, drearily, on his unyielding palliasse, driven to a realization of his own utter impotence. What had he done in the cause he had espoused? Nothing—simply nothing. Worse; he had thrust himself like some clumsy, bull-headed elephant, into the girl's life, into the midst of her troubles, without even that animal's capacity for attaining his object by sheer might. And the result was only to aggravate her lot; to cause Jake to hasten his plans, and add threats to his other persecutions. And as for the raiders, they were still at large and no nearer capture than when he had first arrived. Yes, he told himself, he had nothing but failure to his account. And that failure, instead of being harmlessly negative, was an aggravation of the situation.

But at last, miserable, overwrought, and suffering as he was, sleep came to him; a deep sleep that carried him far into the morning.

He had been left undisturbed by his comrades when they turned out at daybreak. Joe had seen to this. He had put

them off with an invention of his fertile imagination which satisfied them. Then, having hurried through his own immediate morning duties, he waited, with that philosophic patience which he applied now in his declining years to all the greater issues of his life, for his friend's awakening.

And when Tresler awoke he was wonderfully refreshed. His recuperative faculties were remarkable. The aching of his head had passed away, and with it the deplorable hopelessness of overnight. He sat up on his bunk, and the first object that his gaze fell upon was the patient figure of old Joe.

"Well—Scott! it's late. What's the time? Where are the boys? What are you doing here?"

He fired his questions rapidly. But Joe was not to be hurried; neither was he going to waste precious time on unnecessary talk. So he shrugged his shoulders and indicated the departure of the men to work with a backward jerk of his head, and, while Tresler performed his brief toilet, got to business in his own way.

"Feelin' good?" he asked.

"Fair."

"Goin' right up to see Jake?"

"Yes. Where is he?"

"In his shack. Say," the old man shifted uneasily, "I've tho't a crateful sence we wus yarnin' last night, I guess. Don't git shuin' Jake too close agin the wall. Give him your yarn easy. Kind o' talk han'sum by him. He's goin' to figger this thing out fer us. He'll git givin' us a lead, mebbe, when he ain't calc'latin' to. Savee?"

Tresler didn't answer at once; in fact, he didn't quite see the old man's point. He completed his toilet by buckling on his belt and revolver. Then he prepared to depart.

"We'll see. I intend to be governed by circumstances," he said quietly.

"Jest so. An' circumstances has the way o' governin' most things, anyways. Guess I'm jest astin' you to rub the corners off'n them circumstances so they'll run smooth."

Tresler smiled at the manner of the old man's advice, which was plain enough this time.

"I see. Well, so long."

He hurried out and Joe watched him go. Then the little man rose from his seat and went out to Teddy Jinks's kitchen on the pretence of yarnning. In reality he knew that the foreman's hut was in full view from the kitchen window.

Tresler walked briskly across to the hut. He never in his life felt more ready to meet Jake than he did at that moment. He depended on the outcome of this interview for the whole of his future course. He did not attempt to calculate the possible result. He felt that to do so would be to cramp his procedure. He meant to work on his knowledge of his rival's character. Herein lay his hopes of success. It was Joe who had given him his cue. "It's the most dangerousest thing to hit a 'rattler' till you've got him good an' riled," the little man had once said. "Then he lifts an' it's dead easy, I guess. Hit him lyin', an' ef you don't kill him, ther's goin' to be trouble. Them critters has a way of thinkin' hard an' quick or'nary." And Tresler meant to deal with Jake in a similar manner. The rest must be left to the circumstances they had discussed.

It so happened that Jake, too, was late abed that morning. Tresler found him just finishing the breakfast Jinks had brought him. Jake's surly "come in," in response to his knock, brought him face to face with the last man he desired to see in his hut at that moment. And Tresler almost laughed aloud as the great man sprang from the table, nearly overturning it in his angry haste.

"It's all right, Jake," he said with a smile, "I come in peace."

And the other stood for a moment eyeing him fiercely, yet not knowing quite how to take him. Without waiting for an invitation his visitor seated himself on the end of the bunk and stared back squarely into the angry face. It did him good, as

he remembered the events of the night before, to thus beard this man who hated him to the point of murder.

He waited for Jake to reply; and while his gaze wandered over the cruel, intolerant, overbearing face he found himself speculating as to the caste of that which lay hidden beneath the black, coarse mat of beard.

At last the reply came, and he had expected no better.

"What in h—— are you doin' here?" Jake asked brutally. Then, as an afterthought, "Why ain't you out on the range?"

Tresler permitted himself to lounge over on his elbow and cross his legs with an aggravating air of ease.

"For much the same reason that you are only just finishing your grub. I overslept myself."

And he watched Jake choke back the furious retort that suddenly leapt to his lips. It was evident, even to the intolerant disposition of the foreman that it was no time for abuse and anger. This man had come to him for some particular purpose, and it behoved him to keep guard on himself. The doings of the night before were in his mind, and he realized that it would be well to meet him coolly. Therefore, instead of the outburst so natural to him, he contented himself with a cool survey of his antagonist, while he put a non-committing inquiry.

"Wal?"

And Tresler knew that his presence was accepted, and that he had scored the first point. At once he assumed a business-like air. He sat up and generally displayed a briskness quite out of keeping with his former attitude.

"I suppose I ought to apologize for my intrusion," he began, "but when you have heard my story, you will understand its necessity. I had a busy night last night."

If he had expected any effect from this announcement he was disappointed. Jake's face never for a moment relaxed its grim look of attention.

"Yes," he went on, as the foreman remained silent.

"These raiders—this Red Mask, or whatever he is called—I saw him last night. I saw him here on this ranch."

Jake stirred. He eyed his companion as though he would read him through and through.

"You saw—Red Mask—last night?" he said slowly.

"Yes. I saw him and one of his satellites."

"Go on." It was all the man vouchsafed, but it spoke volumes.

And Tresler at once proceeded with his story of the midnight visit of the masked rider and his companion. He told his story in as few words as possible, being careful to omit nothing, and laying a slight stress on his own rambling in the neighbourhood of the house. He was very careful to confine himself to the matter of the apparition, avoiding all allusion to the further happenings of the night. When he had finished, which he did without any interruption from the other, Jake spoke with quiet appreciation.

"An' you've brought the yarn to me. For any partic'lar reason?"

Tresler raised his eyebrows. "Certainly," he replied. "You are foreman of the ranch. Mr. Marbolt's interests are yours."

"That being so, I'd like to know what you were doing around the house at that hour of night?" was Jake's prompt retort.

Tresler had looked for this. He knew perfectly well that Jake did not expect his question to be answered. Didn't particularly want it answered. It was simply to serve a purpose. He was trying to draw him.

"That is my affair, Jake. For the moment, at least, let us set personalities on one side. No doubt we have accounts to settle. I may as well say at once we are in each other's debt. But this matter I am speaking of is of personal interest to everybody around the district."

All the time he was speaking, Tresler was watching for the smallest change in Jake's manner. And as he went on his

appreciation of the fellow's capability rose. He realized that Jake was, after all, something more than a mass of beef and muscle. As no comment was forthcoming he went on rapidly.

"Now, last night's apparition was not altogether new to me. I saw the same thing the first night I arrived on the ranch, but, being 'green' at the time, it lost its significance. Now, it is different. It needs explaining. So I have come to you. But I have not come to you without having considered the matter as fully as it is possible for one in my position to do. Mark me carefully. I have weighed all the details of Red Mask's raids; considered them from all points. Time and place, distance, the apparitions around the ranch, for those ghostly visitors have, at times, been seen in the neighbourhood by others. And all these things so tally that they have produced a conviction in my mind that there is a prime mover in the business to be found on this ranch."

"An' the prime mover?" Jake's interest had in no way relaxed. He seemed to be eager to hear everything Tresler could tell him. The latter shrugged.

"Who is there on this ranch that cannot at all times be accounted for? Only one man. Anton—Black Anton."

A pause ensued. Tresler had played a high card. If Jake refused to be drawn it would be awkward. The pause seemed endless and he was forced to provoke an answer.

"Well?" he questioned sharply.

"Well," echoed the foreman; and the other noted the quiet derision in his tone, "seems to me you've done a deal of figgering."

Tresler nodded.

Jake turned away with something very like a smile. Evidently he had decided upon the course to be pursued. Tresler, watching him, could not quite make up his mind whether he was playing the winning hand, or whether his opponent was finessing for the odd trick. Jake suddenly became expansive.

"I'd like to know how we're standin' before we go

further," he said; "though, mind you, I ain't asking. I tell you candidly I ain't got no use for you, and I guess it would take a microscope to see your affection for me. This bein' so, I ask myself, what has this feller come around with his yarn to me for? I allow there's two possible reasons which strike me as bein' of any consequence. One is that, maybe, some'eres in the back of your head, you've a notion that I know a heap about this racket, and sort o' wink at it, seein' Marbolt's blind, an' draw a bit out of the game. And the other is, you're honest, an' tryin' to play the game right. Now, I'll ask you not to get plumb scared when I tell you I think you're dead honest about this thing. If I didn't—wal, maybe you'd be lit out of this shack by now."

Jake reached over to the table and picked up a plug of tobacco and tore off a chew with his great strong teeth. And Tresler could not help marvelling at the pincher-like power with which he bit through the plug.

"Now, Tresler, there's that between us that can never let us be friends. I'm goin' to get level with you some day. But just now, as you said, we can let things bide. I say you're honest in this thing, and if you choose to be honest with me I'll be honest with you."

One word flashed through Tresler's brain: "finesse."

"I'm glad you think that way, Jake," he said seriously "My object is to get to the bottom of this matter."

It was a neat play in the game, the way in which these two smoothed each other down. They accepted each other's assurances with the suavity of practised lawyers, each without an atom of credence or good faith.

"Just so," Jake responded, with a ludicrous attempt at benignity. "An' it's due to the fact that you've been smart enough to light on the right trail, that I'm ready to tell you something I've been holding up from everybody, even Marbolt himself. Mind, I haven't got the dead-gut cinch on these folk yet, though I'm right on to 'em, sure. Anton, that's the feller. I've tracked him from the other side of the line.

His real name's 'Tough' McCulloch, an' I guess I know as much as there is to be known of him an' his history, which is pretty rotten. He's wanted in Montana for murder. Not one, but half a dozen. Say, shall I tell you what he's doin'? He rides out of here at night, an' joins a gang of scallywag Breeds, like himself, an' they are the crowd that have been raiding all around us. And Anton—well, I'd like to gamble my last dollar he's the fellow wearing the Red Mask. Say, I knew he was out last night. He was out with two of the horses. I was around. An' at daylight I went up to the stable while he was sleepin', an' the dog-gone fool hadn't cleaned the saddle marks from their backs. Now, if you're feeling like bearin' a hand in lagging this black son-of-a—I'm with you fair an' square. We won't shake hands, for good reason, but your word'll go with me."

"Nothing would suit me better."

Tresler was struggling to fathom the man's object.

"Good. Now we'll quietly go up to the stable. Maybe you can tell if a horse has been recently saddled, even after grooming?"

"Yes."

"Then I'll show you. An' mind, Marbolt hasn't ordered one of his private horses out. Nor ain't Miss Diane. It's Anton."

He rose and prepared to depart, but Tresler stayed him.

"One moment, Jake," he said. "I don't wish to give offence, but tell me why, if you have discovered so much about Anton, have you let these things go on so long? Think of the murder of Manson Orr, of Arizona's wound, of the dozen and one outrages of which even I am aware."

Jake stood silently contemplating him for a while. Nor was there any sign of his swift anger. He smiled faintly, and again Tresler noted the nasty tone of derision in his voice when he answered.

"I thought maybe you'd learnt a deal out here where you find everybody on their own. I thought you'd p'raps learned

that it ain't wise to raise trouble till you've got the business end of your gun pointin' right. Can't you see there's not a cent's worth of evidence against the man yet? Have you ever heard where he runs his cattle? Has anybody? Has any one ever seen under that mask? Has any one been found who could identify even his figure? No. Red Mask is a will-o'-the-wisp. He's a ghost; and it's our business to find the body o' that ghost. I'm not the fool to go around to Anton and say, 'You are Red Mask.' He'd laugh in my face. An' later on I guess I'd be targettin' a shot for him. What if I rounded to the govenor an' got him fired? It would be the worst possible. Keepin' him here, and lying low, we have a chance of puttin' him out of business. No, sir, we're dealin' with the smartest crook west of Winnipeg. But I'll have him; we'll get him. I never was bested yet. An' I'll have him, same as I get any other guy that crosses me. Let's get on."

They moved out of the hut.

"It's been taking you some time, already," Tresler suggested with a smile, as they moved across the open.

Jake took no umbrage. His dark face responded with a sardonic grin, and his eyes were fiercely alight.

"Tchah!" he ejaculated impatiently. "Say, you never heard tell of a feller gettin' his own good, an' gettin' it quick. Cattle thieves ain't easy handlin', an' I don't jump till I'm riled."

Tresler made no answer, and the two reached the stable without exchanging another word. Inside they found Anton at work, cleaning harness. He looked up as they came in, and Tresler eyed him with a renewed interest. And the man's face was worth studying. There was no smile, no light in it, and even very little interest. His smooth, tawny skin and aquiline features, his black hair and blacker eyes, in their dark setting, had a devilish look to Tresler's imagination. He even found himself wondering where the good looks he had observed when they met before had vanished to. Jake nodded to him and passed into Bessie's stall at once.

"This is the mare, Tresler, the dandiest thing ever bred on

this ranch. Look at her points. See the coat, its colour. Red roan, with legs black as soot. Say, she's a picture. Now I guess she'd fetch a couple of hundred dollars in your country."

He said all this for Anton's benefit while he smoothed his hand over Bessie's back. Tresler followed suit, feeling for the impression of the saddle cloth in the hair. It was there, and he went on inspecting the legs, with the air of a connoisseur. The other saddle horse they treated in the same way, but the drivers were left alone. For some minutes they stood discussing the two animals and then passed out again. Anton had displayed not the least interest in their doings, although nothing had escaped his keen, swift-moving eyes.

Once out of earshot Jake turned to Tresler.

"Wal?"

"The horses have both been saddled."

"Good. Now we've got the thing plumb located. You heard them gassin' at the stable. You heard 'em slam the door. You saw the two come along. An' one of 'em must have been Anton. Leastways he must have let 'em have the horses. I guess that's an alternative. I say Anton was up on one of them hosses, an' the other was some gorldurned Breed mate of his. Good. We're goin' right on to see the govenor."

"What to do?" asked Tresler.

"To give him your yarn," Jake said shortly.

They were half-way to the house when the foreman suddenly halted and stared out over the lower ranch buildings at the distant pastures. Tresler was slightly behind him as he stood and only had a sight of the man's profile. He did not seem to be looking at any particular object. His attitude was one of thoughtful introspection. Tresler waited. Things were turning out better than he had hoped, and he had no wish but to let the arbiter of the situation take his own way. He began to think that, whatever Jake's ulterior object might be, he was in earnest about Anton.

At last his companion grunted and turned, and he saw at

once that the artificial comradeship of his manner had lifted, and the "Jake," as he had already learned to understand him, was dominant again. The vicious setting of the brows, the fiery eyes. He quite understood that self-control was the weakest side of this man's character, and could not long withstand the more powerful bullying nature that swayed him.

"I asked you a question back there," he said, jerking his head in the direction of his hut, "an' you said it was your affair; an' we'd best let personalities stand for the moment. I'd like an answer before we go further. You reckon to be honest, I guess. Wal, now's your chance. Tell me to my face, what I've learned for myself. What were you doin' round here last night? What were you doin' in Marbolt's kitchen?"

Tresler understood the motive of the man's insistence now. Jake was showing him a side of his character he had hardly suspected. It was the human nature in the man asking for a confirmation of his worst fears, in reality his worst knowledge. For he was well aware that Jake had witnessed the scene in the kitchen.

"As I said before, it is my affair," he responded, with an assumption of indifference. "Still, since you insist, you may as well know first as last. I went to see Miss Diane. I saw her——"

"An'?" There was a tense restraint in the monosyllable.

Tresler shrugged. "Miss Marbolt is my promised wife."

There was a deathly silence after his announcement. Tresler looked out over the ranch. He seemed to see everything about him at once; even Jake was in the strained focus, although he was not looking at him. His nerves were strung, and seemed as though they were held in a vice. He thought he could even hear the sound of his own temples beating. He had no fear, but he was expectant.

Then Jake broke the silence, and his voice, though harsh, was low; it was muffled with a throatiness caused by the passion that moved him.

"You'll never marry that gal," he said

And Tresler was round on him in an instant, and his face was alight with a cold smile.

"I will," he said.

And then Jake moved on with something very like a rush. And Tresler followed. His smile was still upon his face. But it was there of its own accord, a nervous mask which had nothing to do with the thoughts passing behind it.

CHAPTER XIV

A PORTENTOUS INTERVIEW

TRESLER was in no way blind to the quality of the armistice that had been arranged between himself and Jake. He knew full well that that peaceful interim would be used by Jake to raise earthworks of the earthiest kind, and to train his guns with deadly accuracy upon his enemy. Well, so he wanted. His purpose was to draw his adversary's fire directly upon himself. As he had said, to do anything to help the girl he loved, he must himself be in the fighting line. And from the moment of his doubtful compact with Jake he felt that he was not only in the fighting line, but that, if all he had heard on the subject of Red Mask was true, he would become the centre of attack. There was a pleasant feeling of excitement and uncertainty in his position, and he followed Jake all the more eagerly to the presence of the rancher, only wondering in what manner the forthcoming interview was to affect matters.

Julian Marbolt had not left his bedroom when they arrived at the house. Diane, looking a little anxious when she saw these two together, showed them into her father's office. She was half disposed to refuse Jake's request that she should summon the blind man, but a smiling nod from Tresler decided her.

"Very well, Jake," she replied coldly. "You won't best please father unless the matter is important." This was said merely to conceal her real knowledge of the object of the visit.

If Jake understood he gave no sign. But he had seen and

resented the silent assurance Tresler had given her. His angry eyes watched her as she went off; and as she disappeared he turned to his companion, who had seated himself by the window.

"Guess you ain't figgered on the 'old man' 'bout her?" he said.

"That, I think, is strictly my affair," Tresler replied coldly.

Jake laughed, and sat down near the door. The answer had no effect on him.

"Say, I guess you ain't never had a cyclone hit you?" he asked maliciously. "It'll be interestin' to see when you tell him. Maybe——"

Whatever he was about to say was cut short by the approach of the rancher. And it was wonderful the change that came over the man as he sat listening to the tap-tap of the blind man's stick in the passage. He watched the door uneasily, and there was a sort of breathless attention about him. Tresler, watching, could not help thinking of the approach of some Eastern potentate, with his waiting courtiers and subjects rubbing their faces in the dust lest his wrath should be visited upon them. He admitted that Jake's attitude just now was his true one.

At the door Julian Marbolt stood for a moment, doing by means of his wonderful hearing what his eyes failed to do for him. And the marvel of it was that he faced accurately, first towards Tresler then towards Jake. He stood like some tall, ascetic, grey-headed priest, garbed in a dressing-gown that needed but little imagination to convert into a cassock. And the picture of benevolence he made was only marred by the staring of his dreadful eyes.

"Well, Jake?" he said, in subdued, gentle tones. "What trouble has brought you round here at this hour?"

"Trouble enough," Jake responded, with a slight laugh. "Tresler here, brings it, though."

The blind man turned towards the window and instinctively focussed the younger man, and somehow Tresler shivered as

with a cold draught when the sightless eyes fixed themselves upon him.

"Ah, you Tresler. Well, we'll hear all about it." Marbolt moved slowly, though without the aid of his stick now, over to the table, and seated himself.

"It's the old trouble," said Jake, when his master had settled himself. "The cattle 'duffers.' They're gettin' busy—busy around this ranch again."

"Well?" Marbolt turned to Tresler; his action was a decided snub to Jake.

Tresler took his cue and began his story. He told it almost exactly as he had told it to Jake, but with one slight difference: he gave no undue emphasis to his presence in the vicinity of the house. And Marbolt listened closely, the frowning brows bespeaking his concentration, and his unmoving eyes his fixed attention. He listened apparently unmoved to every detail, and displayed a wonderful patience while Tresler went point for point over his arguments in favour of his suspicions of Anton. Once only he permitted his sightless glance to pass in Jake's direction, and that was at the linking of the foreman's name with Tresler's suspicions. As his story came to an end the blind man rested one elbow on the table, and propped his chin upon his hand. The other hand coming into contact with a ruler lying adjacent, he picked it up and thoughtfully tapped the table, while the two men waited for him to speak.

At last he turned towards his foreman, and, with an impressive gesture, indicated Tresler.

"This story is nothing new to us, Jake," he said. Then for a moment his voice dropped, and took on a pained tone. "I only wish it were; then we could afford to laugh at it. No, there can be no laughing here. Past experience has taught us that. It is a matter of the greatest seriousness—danger. So much for the main features. But there are side issues, suspicions you have formed," turning back to Tresler, "which I cannot altogether accept. Mind, I do not

say flatly that you are wrong, but I cannot accept them without question.

"Jake here has had suspicions of Anton. I know that, though he has never asserted them to me in so direct a fashion as apparently he has to you." He paused: then he went on in an introspective manner. "I am getting on in years. I have already had a good innings right here on this ranch. I have watched the country develop. I have seen the settlers come, sow the seed of their homesteads and small ranches, and watched the crop grow. I have rented them grazing. I have sold them stock. I have made money, and they have made money, and the country has prospered. It is good to see these things; good for me, especially, for I was the first here. I have been lord of the land, and Jake my lieutenant. The old Indian days have gone, and I have looked for nothing but peace and prosperity. I wanted prosperity, for I admit I love it. I am a business man, and I do everything in connection with this ranch on a sound business basis. Not like many of those about me. In short, I am here to make money. And why not? I own the land."

The last was said as though in argument. Tresler could not help being struck by the manner in which he alluded to the making of money. There was an air of the miser about him when he spoke of it, a hardness about the mouth which the close-trimmed beard made no pretence of concealing. And there was a world of arrogance in the way he said, "I own the land." However, he was given no time for further observation, for Marbolt seemed to realize his own digression and came back abruptly to the object of his discourse.

"Then this spectre, Red Mask, comes along. He moves with the mystery of the Wandering Jew, and, like that imaginary person, scourges the country wherever he goes, only in a different manner. Anton had been with me three years when this raider appeared. Since then there have been no less than twenty-eight robberies, accompanied more or less by manslaughter." He became more animated and leaned forward in

his chair, pointing the ruler he still held in his hand at Tresler as he named the figures. His red eyes seemed to stare harder and his heavy brows to knit more closely across his forehead. "Yes," he reiterated, "twenty-eight robberies. And I, with others, have estimated the number and value of stock that has been lost to this scoundrel. In round figures five thousand head of cattle, one hundred and fifty thousand dollars, whisked away, spirited out of this district alone in the course of a few years. One hundred and fifty thousand dollars; one hundred and fifty thousand," he mouthed the words as though he delighted in the sound of so large a sum of money. Then his whole manner changed. A fiend could not have looked more vicious. "And in all I have lost five hundred beeves to him. Five hundred," he cried, his voice high-pitched in his anger, "fifteen thousand dollars, besides horses, and—and some of my men wounded, even killed."

Again he ceased speaking, and relapsed into a brooding attitude. And the two men watched him. His personality fascinated Tresler. He even began to understand something of the general fear he inspired. He thought of Jake who had been so many years with him, and he thought he understood something of the condition he must inspire in any one of no great moral strength who remained with him long. Then he thought of Diane, and moved uneasily. He remembered Jake's allusion to a cyclone.

At Tresler's movement the blind man roused at once and proceeded with his story.

"And he roams this country at large, unchecked, unopposed. Working his will whithersoever he fancies, unseen, unknown but for his sobriquet. And you claim he and Anton are one. This great man—for in his way he is great, head and shoulders above all other criminals, by reason of the extent of his exploits. Pshaw!"—his tone was scoffing—"let me tell you, on three different nights when this monster was abroad, carrying destruction in his path, Anton was driving me. Or, at least, was with me, having driven me

into Forks on one occasion, and twice in the neighbourhood of Calford. No, I am aware that Anton is a blackleg, or has been one, but he has served me well and truly since he has been my servant. As for the saddle marks," he leaned back in his chair and his gentle smile returned slowly to his face. "No, no, Tresler, that is insufficient. Remember, Anton is a Breed, a young man, and, as Breeds go, good-looking. There is a Breed camp in the neighbourhood where they indulge in all the puskies and orgies native to them. We must question him. I expect he has taken French leave with my horses."

"But you forget the Breed camp has gone," put in Jake quickly. "Since the comin' of the police to Forks they've cleared out, and, as yet, we ain't located 'em. I expect it's the hills."

"Just so, Jake," replied Marbolt, turning to the foreman coldly. "I forgot that you told me of it before. But that makes little difference. I have no doubt Anton knows where they are. Now," he went on, turning again to Tresler, "I hold no brief for Anton in particular. If I thought for a moment it were so," a sudden storm of vindictiveness leapt into his tone, "I would hound him down, and be near while they hung him slowly to death on one of our own trees. I would willingly stand by while he was put to the worst possible tortures, and revel in his cries of agony. Don't mistake me. If you could prove Anton to be the rascal, he should die, whatever the consequences. We would wait for no law. But you are all on the wrong trail, I feel sure."

He had dropped back into his old soft spoken manner, and Tresler felt like hating him for the vileness of the nature he displayed.

"You plead well for Anton, Mr. Marbolt," he could not help saying, "but after what I heard last night, I cannot believe he is not in league with these people."

It was an unfortunate remark, and brought the biting answer that might have been expected.

"I plead for no man, Tresler. Most certainly not for a

Breed. I show you where you are wrong. Your inexperience is lamentable, but you cannot help it." He paused, but went on again almost at once. "Since I cannot persuade you, go with your story to the police. Let them judge of your evidence, and if a man of Fyles's undoubted skill and shrewdness acts upon it, I'll pay you one hundred dollars."

Tresler saw the force of the other's reply, but resented the tone, while he still remained utterly unconvinced of Anton's innocence. Perhaps the blind man realized his unnecessary harshness, for he quickly veered round again to his low-voiced benignity. And Jake, interested but silent, sat watching his master with an inscrutable look in his bold eyes and a half smile on his hard face.

"No, Tresler," he said, "we can set all that part of it on one side. You did quite right to come to me, though," he added hastily; "I thank you heartily. From past experience we have learned that your apparition means mischief. It means that a raiding expedition is afoot. Maybe it was committed last night. I suppose," turning to Jake, "you have not heard?"

"No." Jake shook his head.

"Well, we are forewarned, thanks to you, Tresler," the other went on gravely. "And it shan't be my fault if we are not forearmed. We must send a warning round to the nearest homesteads. I really don't know what will happen if this goes on much longer."

"Why not take concerted action? Why not resort to what was recently suggested—a vigilance party?" Tresler put in quickly.

The other shook his head and turned to Jake for support. But none was forthcoming. Jake was watching that strong sightless face, gazing into it with a look of bitter hatred and sinister intentness. This change so astonished Tresler that he paid no attention to the rancher's reply.

And at once Marbolt's peculiar instinct asserted itself. He faced from one to the other with a perplexed frown, and as his

red eyes fell finally upon the foreman, that individual's whole expression was instantly transformed to one of confusion. And Tresler could not help calling to mind the schoolboy detected in some misdemeanour. At first the confusion, then the attempt at bland innocence, followed by dogged sullenness. It was evident that Jake's conscience blinded him to the fact of the other's sightless gaze.

"What say you, Jake? We can only leave it to the police and be on our guard."

The foreman fumbled out his reply almost too eagerly.

"Yes," he said, "sure; we must be on our guard. Guess we'd better send out night guards to the different stations." He stretched himself with an assumption of ease. Then suddenly he sat bolt upright and a peculiar expression came into his eyes. Tresler detected the half smile and the side glance in his own direction. "Yes," he went on, composedly enough now, "partic'larly Willow Bluff."

"Why Willow Bluff?" asked the rancher, with some perplexity.

"Why? Why? Because we're waitin' to ship them two hundred beeves to the coast. They're sold, you remember, an' ther's only them two Breeds, Jim an' Lag Henderson, in charge of 'em. Why it 'ud be pie, a dead soft snap fer Red Mask's gang. An' the station's that lonesome. All o' twenty mile from here."

Julian Marbolt sat thinking for a moment. "Yes, you're right," he agreed at last. "We'll send out extra night guards. And you'd best detail two good, reliable men for a few days at Willow Bluff. Only thoroughly reliable men, mind. You see to it."

Jake turned to Tresler at once, his face beaming with a malicious grin. And the latter understood. But he was not prepared for the skilful trap which his arch-enemy was baiting for him, and into which he was to promptly fall.

"How'd it suit you, Tresler?" he asked. Then without waiting for a reply he went on, "But ther', I guess it wouldn't

do sendin' you. You ain't the sort to get scrappin' hoss-thieves. It wants grit. It's tough work an' needs tough men. Pshaw!"

Tresler's blood was up in a moment. He forgot discretion and everything else under the taunt.

"I don't know that it wouldn't do, Jake," he retorted promptly. "It seems to me your remarks come badly from a man who has reason to know—to remember—that I am capable of holding my own with most men, even those big enough to eat me."

He saw his blunder even while he was speaking. But he was red-hot with indignation and didn't care a jot for the consequences. And Jake came at him. If the foreman's taunt had roused him, it was nothing to the effect of his reply. Jake crossed the room in a couple of strides and his furious face was thrust close into Tresler's, and, in a voice hoarse with passion, he fairly gasped at him—

"I ain't fergot. An' by G——"

But he got no further. A movement on the part of the rancher interrupted him. Before he realized what was happening the blind man was at his side with a grip on his arm that made him wince.

"Stop it!" he cried fiercely. "Stop it, you fool! Another word and, blind as I am, I'll——" Jake struggled to release himself, but Marbolt held him with almost super-human strength and slowly backed him from his intended victim. "Back! Do you hear? I'll have no murder done in here—unless I do it myself. Get back—back, blast you!" And Jake was slowly, in spite of his continued struggles, thrust against the wall. And then, as he still resisted, Marbolt pushed the muzzle of a revolver against his face. "I'll drop you like a hog, if you don't——"

But the compelling weapon had instant effect, and the foreman's resistance died out weakly.

The whole scene had occurred so swiftly that Tresler simply stood aghast. The agility, the wonderful sureness and rapidity of movement on Marbolt's part were staggering. The whole

thing seemed impossible, and yet he had seen it; and the meaning of the stories of this man he had listened to came home to him. He was, indeed, something to fear. The great bullying Jake was a child in his hands. Now like a whipped child, he stood with his back to the wall, a picture of hate and fury.

With Jake silenced Marbolt turned on him. His words were few but sufficient.

"And as for you, Tresler," he said coldly, "keep that tongue of yours easy. I am master here."

There was a brief silence, then the rancher returned to the subject that had caused the struggle.

"Well, what about the men for Willow Bluff, Jake?"

It was Tresler who answered the question, and without a moment's hesitation.

"I should like to go out there, Mr. Marbolt. Especially if there's likely to be trouble."

It was the only position possible for him after what had gone before, and he knew it. He glanced at Jake and saw that, for the moment at least, his hatred for his employer had been set aside. He was smiling a sort of tigerish smile.

"Very well, Tresler," responded the rancher. "And you can choose your own companion. You can go and get ready. Jake," turning to the other, "I want to talk to you."

Tresler went out, feeling that he had made a mess of things. He gave Jake credit for his cleverness, quite appreciating the undying hate that prompted it. But the thing that was most prominent in his thoughts was the display the blind man had given him. He smiled when he thought of Jake's boasted threats to Diane, how impotent they seemed now. But the smile died out when he remembered he, himself, had yet to face the rancher on the delicate subject of his daughter. He remembered only too well Jake's reference to a cyclone, and he made his way to the bunkhouse with no very enlivening thoughts.

In the meantime the two men he had just left remained

silent until the sound of his footsteps had quite died out. Then Marbolt spoke.

"Jake, you are a damned idiot!" he said abruptly.

The foreman made no answer and the other went on.

"Why can't you leave the boy alone? He's harmless; besides he's useful to me—to us."

"Harmless—useful?" Jake laughed bitterly. "Pshaw, I guess your blindness is gettin' round your brains!"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean it 'ud have been better if you'd let me—wipe him out. Better for us—for you."

"I don't see; you forget his money." The blind man's tone was very low. "You forget he intends to buy a ranch and stock. You forget that he has twenty-five thousand dollars to expend. Bah! I'll never make a business man of you."

"And what about your girl?" Jake asked, quite unmoved by the other's explanation.

"My girl?" Marbolt laughed softly. "You are always harping on that. He will leave my girl alone. She knows my wishes, and will—shall obey me. I don't care a curse about him or his affairs. But I want his money, and if you will only see to your diabolical temper, I'll—we'll have it. Your share stands good in this as in all other deals."

It was the foreman's turn to laugh. But there was no mirth in it. It stopped as suddenly as it began, cut off short.

"He will leave your girl alone, will he?" he said, with a sneer. "Say, d'you know what he was doin' around this house last night when he saw those hoss-thief guys, or shall I tell you?"

"You'd better tell me," replied the rancher, coldly.

"He was after your girl. Say, an' what's more, he saw her. An' what's still more, she's promised to be his wife. He told me."

"What's that? Say it again." There was an ominous calmness in the blind man's manner.

"I said he was after your girl, saw her, and she's—promised—to—be—his—wife."

"Ah!"

Then there was a silence for some minutes. The red eyes were frowning in the direction of the window. At last the man drew a deep breath, and Jake, watching him, wondered what was coming.

"I'll see her," he said slowly, "and I'll see him—after he comes back from Willow Bluff."

That was all, but Jake, accustomed to Julian Marbolt's every mood, read a deal more than the words expressed. He waited for what else might be coming, but only received a curt dismissal in tones so sharp that he hurried out of the room precipitately.

Once clear of the verandah he walked more slowly, and his eyes turned in the direction of the bunkhouse. All the old hatred was stirred within him as he saw Tresler turn the angle of the building and disappear within its doorway.

"Guess no one's goin' to see you—after Willow Bluff," he muttered. "No one."

CHAPTER XV

AT WILLOW BLUFF

TRESLER would have liked to see Diane before going out to Willow Bluff, but reflections showed him how impossible that would be; at least, how much unnecessary risk it would involve for her. After what he had just witnessed of her father, it behoved him to do nothing rashly as far as she was concerned, so he turned his whole attention to his preparations for departure.

He had made up his mind as to his comrade without a second thought. Arizona was his man, and he sent the diplomatic Joe out to bring him in from Pine Creek sloughs, where he was cutting late hay for winter stores.

In about half an hour the American came in, all curiosity and eagerness; nor would he be satisfied until he had been told the whole details of the matter that had led up to the appointment. Tresler kept back nothing but his private affairs relating to Diane. At the conclusion of the recital, Arizona's rising temper culminated in an explosion.

"Say, that feller Jake's a meaner pirate 'n a cuss as 'ud thieve the supper from a blind dawg an' then lick hell out o' him 'cos he can't see." Which outburst of feeling having satisfied the necessity of the moment, he became practical. "An' you're goin', you an' me?" he asked incredulously.

"That's the idea, Arizona; but of course you're quite free to please yourself. I chose you; Marbolt gave me the privilege of selection."

"Wal, guess we'd best git doin'. Willow Bluff station's fair to decent, so we'll only need our blankets an' grub—an' a tidy bunch of ammunition. Guess I'll go an' see Teddy fer the rations."

He went off in a hurry. Tresler looked after him. It was good to be dealing with such a man after those others, Jake and the rancher. Arizona's manner of accepting his selection pleased him. There was no "yes" or "no" about it: no argument. A silent acceptance and ready thought for their needs. A thorough old campaigner. A man to be relied on in emergency—a man to be appreciated.

In two hours everything was in readiness, Tresler contenting himself with a reassuring message to Diane through the medium of Joe.

They rode off. Jezebel was on her good behaviour, and Arizona's kept up with her fast, deliberate walk by means of his cowhorse amble. As they came to the ford, Tresler drew up and dismounted, and the other watched him while he produced a wicker-covered glass flask from his pocket.

"What's that?" he asked. "Rye?"

Tresler shook his head, and tried the metal screw cap.

"No," he replied shortly.

Then he leant over the water and carefully set the bottle floating, pushing it out as far as possible with his foot while he supported himself by the overhanging bough of a tree. Then he stood watching it carried slowly amid-stream. Presently the improvised craft darted out with a rush into the current, and swept onwards with the main flow of the water. Then he returned and remounted his impatient mare.

"That," he said, as they rode on, "is a message. Fyles's men are down the river spying out the land, and, incidentally, waiting to hear from me. The message I've sent them is a request for assistance at Willow Bluff. I have given them sound reason, which Sergeant Fyles will understand."

Arizona displayed considerable astonishment, which found expression in a deprecating avowal.

"Say, I guess I'm too much o' the old hand. I didn't jest think o' that."

It was all he vouchsafed, but it said a great deal. And the thin face and wild eyes said more.

Now they rode on in silence, while they followed the wood-lined trail along the river. The shade was delightful, and the trail sufficiently sandy to muffle the sound of the horses' hoofs and so leave the silence unbroken. There was a faint hum from the insects that haunted the river, but it was drowsy, soft, and only emphasized the perfect sylvan solitude. After awhile the trail left the river and gently inclined up to the prairie level. Then the bush broke and became scattered into small bluffs, and a sniff of the bracing air of the plains brushed away the last odour of the redolent glades they were leaving.

It was here that Arizona roused himself. He was of the prairie, belonging to the prairie. The woodlands depressed him, but the prairie made him expansive.

"Seems to me, Tresler, you're kind o' takin' a heap o' chances—mostly onnes'ary. Meanin' ther' ain't no more reason to it than whistlin' Methody hymns to a deaf mule. Can't see why you're mussin' y'self up wi' these all-fired hoss-thieves. You're askin' fer a sight more'n you ken eat."

"And, like all men of such condition, I shall probably eat to repletion, I suppose you mean."

Arizona turned a doubtful eye on the speaker, and quietly spat over his horse's shoulder.

"Guess your langwidge ain't mine," he said thoughtfully; "but if you're meanin' you're goin' to git your belly full, I calc'late you're li'ble to git like a crop-bound rooster wi' the moult 'fore you're through. An' I sez, why?"

Tresler shrugged. "Why does a man do anything?" he asked indifferently.

"Gener'ly fer one of two reasons. Guess it's drink or wimmin." Again he shot a speculating glance at his friend, and, as Tresler displayed more interest in the distant view

than in his remarks, he went on. "I ain't heerd tell as you wus death on the bottle."

The object of his solicitude smiled round on him.

"Perhaps you think me a fool. But I just can't stand by seeing things going wrong in a way that threatens to swamp one poor, lonely girl, whose only protection is her blind father."

"Then it is wimmin?"

"If you like."

"But I don't jest see wher' them hoss-thieves figger."

"Perhaps you don't, but believe me they do—indirectly." Tresler paused. Then he went on briskly. "There's no need to go into details about it, but—but I want to run into this gang. Do you know why? Because I want to find out who this Red Mask is. It is on his personality depends the possibility of my helping the one soul on this ranch who deserves nothing but tender kindness at the hands of those about her."

"A—men," Arizona added in the manner he had acquired in his "religioun" days.

"I must set her free of Jake—somehow."

Arizona's eyes flashed round on him quickly. "Jest so," he observed complainingly. "That's how I wanted to do last night."

"And you'd have upset everything."

"Wrong—plumb wrong."

"Perhaps so," Tresler smiled confidently. "We are all liable to mistakes."

Arizona's dissatisfied grunt was unmistakable. "Thet's jest how that sassafras-coloured, bull-beef Joe Nelson got argyfyin' when Jake come around an' located him sleepin' off the night before in the hog-pen. But it don't go no more'n his did, I guess. Howsum, it's wimmin. Say, Tresler," the lean figure leant over towards him, and the wild eyes looked earnestly into his—"it's right, then—dead right?"

"When I've settled with her father—and Jake."

Arizona held out his horny, claw-like hand. "Shake," he said. "I'm glad, real glad."

They gripped for a moment, then the cowpuncher turned away, and sat staring out over the prairie. Tresler, watching him, wondered at that long abstraction. The man's face had a softened look.

"We all fall victims to it sooner or later, Arizona," he ventured presently. "It comes once in a man's lifetime, and it comes for good or ill."

"Twice—me."

The hard fact nipped Tresler's sentimental mood in the bud.

"Ah!"

The other continued his study of the sky-line. "Yup," he said at last. "One died, an' t'other didn't hatch out, kind of, I guess."

"I see."

It was no use attempting sympathy. When Arizona spoke of himself, when he chose to confide his life's troubles to any one, he had a way of stating simple facts merely as facts; he spoke of them because it suited his pessimistic mood.

"Yup. The first was kind o' fady, anyways—sort o' limp in the backbone. Guess I'd got fixed wi' her 'fore I knew a heap. Must 'a bin. Yup, she wus fancy in her notions. Hated sharin' a pannikin o' tea wi' a friend; guess I see her scrape out a fry-pan oncet. I 'lows she had cranks. Guess she hadn't a pile o' brain, neither. She never could locate a hog from a sow, an' as fer stridin' a hoss, hell itself couldn't 'a per-suaded her. She'd a notion fer settin' sideways, an' allus got muleish when you guessed she wus wrong. Yup, she wus red-hot on the mission sociables an' eatin' off'n chiny, an' wa'an't satisfied wi' noospaper on the table; an' took the notion she'd got pimples, an' worried hell out o' her old man till he bo't a razor an' turned his features into a patch o' fall ploughin', an' kind o' bull-dosed her mother into lashin' her stummick wi' some noo-fangled fixin' as wouldn't meet round her nowheres

noways. An' she wus kind o' finnicky wi' her own feedin', too. Guess some wall-eyed cuss had took her into Sacramento an' give her a feed at one of them Dago joints, wher' they disguise most everythin' wi' langwidge, an' ile, an' garlic, till you hate yourself. Guess she died. Mebbe she's got all they things handy now. But I ain't sayin' nothin' mean about her; she jest had her notions. Guess it come from her mother. I 'lows she wus kind o' struck on fool things an' fixin's. Can't blame her no ways. Guess I wus mostly sudden them days. Luv ut fust sight is a real good thing when it comes to savin' labour, but like all labour-savin' fixin's, it's liable to git rattled some, an' then ther' ain't no calc'latin' what's goin' to bust."

Arizona's manner wus very hopeless, but presently he cheered up visibly and renewed his wad of chewing.

"T'other wus kind o' slower in comin' along," he went on, in his reflective drawl. "But when it got around it wus good an' strong, sure. Y' see, ther' wus a deal 'tween us like to make us friendly. She made hash fer the round-up, which I 'lows, when the lady's young, she's most gener'ly an objec' of 'fection fer the boys. Guess she wus most every kind of a gal, wi' her ha'r the colour of a field of wheat ready fer the binder, an' her figger as del'cate as one o' them crazy egg-bilers, an' her pretty face all sparklin' wi' smiles an' hoss-soap, an' her eye! Gee! but she had an eye. Guess she would 'a made a prairie-rose hate itself. But that wus 'fore we hooked up in a team. I 'lows marryin's a mighty bad finish to courtin'."

"You were married?"

"Am."

A silence fell. The horses ambled on in the fresh noonday air. Arizona's look wus forbidding. Suddenly he turned and gazed fiercely into his friend's face.

"Yes, siree. An' it's my 'pinion, in spite of wot some folks sez, gettin' married's most like makin' butter. Courtin's the cream, good an' thick an' juicy, an' you ken lay it on thick, an' you kind o' wonder how them buzzocky old cows got the savvee to perduce sech a daisy liquid. But after the turnin'-point,

which is marryin', it's diff'rent some. 'Tain't cream no longer. It's butter, an' you need to use it sort o' mean. That's how I found, I guess."

"I suppose you settled down, and things went all right, though?" suggested Tresler.

"Wal, maybe that's so. Guess if anythin' wus wrong it wus me. Yer see, ther' ain't a heap o' fellers rightly understands females. I'm most gener'ly patient. Knowin' their weakness, I sez, 'Arizona, you're mud when wimmin gits around. You bein' married, it's your dooty to boost the gal along.' So I jest let her set around an' shovel orders as though I wus the hired man. Say, guess you never had a gal shovellin' orders. It's real sweet to hear 'em, an' I figger they knows their bizness mostly. It makes you feel as though you'd haf a dozen hands an' they wus all gropin' to git to work. That's how I felt, anyways. Every mornin' she'd per-suade me gentle out o' bed 'fore daylight, an' I'd feel like a hog fer sleepin' late. Then she'd shovel the orders hansum, in a voice that 'ud shame molasses. It was allus 'dear' or 'darlin'. Fust haul water, then buck wood, light the stove, feed the hogs an' chick'ns, dung out the ol' cow, fill the lamp, rub down the mare, pick up the kitchen, set the clothes bilin', cook the vittles, an' do a bit o' washin' while she turned over fer five minits. Then she'd git around, mostly 'bout noon, wi' her shower o' ha'r trailin' like a rain o' gold-dust, an' a natty sort o' silk fixin' which she called a 'dressin'-gown,' an' she'd sot right down an' eat the vittles, tellin' me o' things she wanted done as she'd fergot. Ther' wus the hen-roost wanted limin', she was sure the chick'ns had the bugs, an' the ol' mare's harness wanted fixin', so she could drive into town; an' the buckboard wantin' washin', an' the wheels greasin'. An' the seat wus kind o' hard an' wanted packin' wi' a pillar. Then ther' wus the p'tater patch wanted hoein', an' the cabb'ges. An' the hay-mower wus to be got ready fer hayin'. She mostly drove that herself, an' I 'lows I wus glad."

Arizona paused and took a fresh chew. Then he went on.

"Guess you ain't never got hitched?"

Tresler denied the impeachment. "Not yet," he said.

"Hah! Guess it makes a heap o' diff'rence."

"Yes, I suppose so. Sobers a fellow. Makes him feel like settling down."

"Wal, maybe."

"And where's your wife living now?" Tresler asked, after another pause.

"Can't rightly say." There was a nasty sharpness in the manner Arizona jerked his answer out. Y'see, it's this a-ways. I guess I didn't amount to a deal as a married man. Lestways, that's how she got figgerin' after awhile. Guess I'd sp'iled her life some. I 'lows I wus allus a mean cuss. An' she wus real happy bakin' hash. Guess I druv her to drinkin' at the s'loon, too, which made me hate myself wuss. Wal, I jest did wot I could to smooth things an' kep goin'. I got punchin' cows agin, an' giv her every cent o' my wages; but it wa'an't to be." The man's voice was husky, and he paused to recover himself. And then hurried on as though to get the story over as soon as possible. "Guess I wus out on the 'round-up' some weeks, an' then I come back to find her gone—plumb gone. Mebbe she'd got lonesome; I can't say. Yup, the shack wus empty, an' the buckboard gone, an' the blankets, an' most o' the cookin' fixin's. It wus the neighbours put me wise. Neighbours mostly puts you wise. They acted friendly. Ther'd bin a feller come 'long from Montana, a pretty tough Breed feller. He went by the name o' 'Tough' McCulloch."

Tresler started. But Arizona was still staring out at the distant prairie, and the movement escaped him.

"Guess he'd bin around the shack a heap," he went on, "an' the day 'fore I got back the two of 'em had drove out wi' the buckboard loaded, takin' the trail fer the hills. I put after 'em, but never found a trace. I 'lows the feller had guts. He left a message on the table. It wus one o' his guns—loaded. Likely you won't understan', but I kep that message. I ain't see her sence. I did hear tell she wus bakin' hash agin."

I 'lows she could bake hash. Say, Tresler, I've lost hogs, an' I've lost cows, but I'm guessin' ther' ain't nothin' in the world meaner than losin' yer wife."

Tresler made no reply. What could he say? 'Tough' McCulloch! the name rang in his ears. It was the name Anton had been known by in Montana. He tried to think what he ought to do. Should he tell Arizona? No. He dared not. Murder would promptly be done, if he knew anything of the American. No doubt the Breed deserved anything, but there was enough savagery at Mosquito Bend without adding to it. Suddenly another thought occurred to him.

"Did you know the man?" he asked.

"Never set eyes on him. But I guess I shall some day." And Tresler's decision was irrevocably confirmed.

"And the 'gun' message?"

"Wal, it's a way they have in Texas," replied Arizona. "A loaded gun is a mean sort o' challenge. It's a challenge which ain't fer the present zactly. Guess it holds good fer life. Et means 'on sight'."

"I understand."

And the rest of the journey to Willow Bluff was made almost in silence.

The wonderful extent of the blind man's domain now became apparent. They had travelled twenty miles almost as the crow flies, and yet they had not reached its confines. As Arizona said, in response to a remark from his companion, "The sky-line ain't no limit fer the blind hulk's land."

Willow Bluff was, as its name described, just a big bluff of woodland standing at the confluence of two rivers. To the south and west it was open prairie. The place consisted of a small shack, and a group of large pine-log corrals capable of housing a thousand head of stock. And as the men came up they saw, scattered over the adjacent prairie, the peacefully grazing beeves which were to be their charge.

"A pretty bunch," observed Arizona.

"Yes, and a pretty place for a raid."

At that moment the doings of the raiders were uppermost in Tresler's mind.

Then they proceeded to take possession. They found Jim Henderson, a mean-looking Breed boy, in the shack, and promptly set him to work to clean it out. It was not a bad place, but the boys had let it get into a filthy condition, in the customary manner of all half-breeds. However, this they quickly remedied, and Tresler saw quite a decent prospect of comfort for their stay there.

Arizona said very little while there was work to be done. And his companion was astonished, even though he knew him so well, at his capacity and forethought. Evening was the most important time, and here the cattleman stood out a master of his craft. The beeves had to be corralled every night. There must be no chance of straying, since they were sold, and liable for transport at any moment. This work, and the task of counting, demanded all the cattleman's skill. Bands of fifty were rounded up, cut out from the rest, and quietly brought in. When each corral was filled, and the whole herd accommodated for the night, a supply of fresh young hay was thrown to them to keep them occupied during their few remaining hours of waking. Arizona was a giant at the work; and to see his lithe, lean body swaying this way and that, as he swung his well-trained pony around the ambling herd, his arms and "rope" and voice at work, was to understand something of the wild life that claimed him, and the wild, untrained nature which was his.

The last corral was fastened up, and then, but not until then, the two friends took leisure.

"Wal," said Arizona, as they stood leaning against the bars of the biggest corral, "guess ther's goin' to be a night-guard?"

"Yes. These boys are smart enough lads, it seems. We'll let them take two hours about up to midnight. You and I will do the rest."

"An' the hull lot of us 'll sleep round the corrals?"

"That's it."

"An' the hosses?"

"We'll keep them saddled."

"An' these p'lice fellers?"

"That I can't say. We're not likely to see them, anyway."

And so the plans were arranged, simple, even hopeless in construction. Two men, for they could not depend on the half-breeds, to face possibly any odds should the raider choose this spot for attack. But however inadequate the guard, there was something morally strong in the calm, natural manner of its arranging. These two knew that in case of trouble they had only themselves to depend on. Yet neither hesitated, or balked at the undertaking. Possibilities never entered into their calculations.

The first and second night produced no alarm. Nor did they receive any news of a disturbing nature. On the third day Jacob Smith rode into their camp. He was a patrol guard, on a visiting tour of the outlying stations. His news was peaceful enough.

"I don't care a cuss how long the old man keeps the funks," he said, with a cheery laugh. "I give it you right here, this job's a snap. I ride around like a gen'l spyin' fer enemies. Guess Red Mask has his uses."

"So's most folk," responded Arizona, "but 'tain't allus' easy to locate."

"Wal, I guess I ken locate his jest about now. I'm sort o' lyin' fallow, which ain't usual on Skitter Bend."

"Guess not. He's servin' us diff'rent."

"Ah! Doin' night-guard? Say, I'd see blind hulk roastin' 'fore I'd hang on to them beasties. But it's like you, Arizona. You hate him wuss'n hell, an' Jake too, yet you'd—pshaw! So long. Guess I'd best get on. I've got nigh forty miles to do 'fore I git back."

And he rode away, careless, thoughtless, in the midst of a very real danger. And it was the life they all led. They asked for a wage, a bunk, and grub; nothing else mattered.

Tresler had developed a feeling that the whole thing was a matter of form rather than dead earnest, that he had been precipitate in sending his message to the police. He wanted to get back to the ranch. He understood only too well how he had furthered Jake's projects, and cursed himself bitterly for having been so easily duped. He was comfortably out of the way, and the foreman would take particularly good care that he should remain so as long as possible. Arizona, too, had become anything but enlivening. He went about morosely and snapped villainously at the boys. There was no word in answer to the message to the police. They daily searched the bluff for some sign, but without result, and Tresler was rather glad than disappointed, while Arizona seemed utterly without opinion on the matter.

The third night produced a slight shock for Tresler. It was midnight, and one of the boys roused him for his watch. He sat up, and, to his astonishment, found Arizona sitting on a log beside him. He waited until the boy had gone to turn in, then he looked at his friend inquiringly.

"What's up?"

And Arizona's reply fairly staggered him. "Say, Tresler," he said, in a tired voice, utterly unlike his usual forceful manner, "I jest wanted to ast you to change 'watches' wi' me. I've kind o' lost my grip on sleep. Mebbe I'm weak'ning some. I 'lows I'm li'ble to git sleepy later on, an' I tho't, mebbe, ef I wus to do the fust watch—wal, y' see, I guess that plug in my chest ain't done me a heap o' good."

Tresler was on his feet in an instant. It had suddenly dawned on him that this queer son of the prairie was ill.

"Rot, man!" he exclaimed. His tone in no way hid his alarm. They were at the gate of the big corral, hidden in the shadow cast by the high wall of lateral logs. "You go and turn in. I'm going to watch till daylight."

"Say, that's real friendly," observed the other, imperturbably. "But it ain't no use. Guess I couldn't sleep yet."

"Well, please yourself. I'm going to watch till daylight."

Tresler's manner was quietly decided, and Arizona seemed to accept it.

"Wal, ef it hits you that a'ways I'll jest set around till I git sleepy."

Tresler's alarm was very real, but he shrugged with a great assumption of indifference and moved off to make a round of the corrals, carefully hugging the shadow of the walls as he went. After awhile he returned to his post. Arizona was still sitting where he had left him.

There was a silence for a few minutes. Then the American quietly drew his revolver and spun the chambers round. Tresler watched him, and the other, looking up, caught his eye.

"Guess these things is kind o' tricky," he observed, in explanation. "I got it jammed oncet. It's a decent weapin' but noo, an' I ain't fer noo fixin's. This hyar," he went on, drawing a second one from its holster, "is a 'six' an' 'ud drop an ox at fifty. Ha'r trigger, too. It's a daddy. Guess it wus 'Tough' McCulloch's. Guess you ain't gotten yours on your hip?"

Tresler shook his head. "No, I use the belt for my breeches, and keep the guns loose in my pockets when I'm not riding."

"Wrong. Say, fix 'em right. You take a sight too many chances."

Tresler laughingly complied. "I'm not likely to need them, but still——"

"Nope." Arizona returned his guns to their resting-place. Then he looked up. "Say, guess I kind o' fixed the hosses diff'rent. Our hosses. Bro't 'em up an' stood 'em in the angle wher' this corral joins the next one. Seems better; more handy-like. It's sheltered, an' ther's a bit of a sharp breeze. One o' them early frosts." He looked up at the sky. "Guess ther' didn't ought. Ther' ain't no moon till nigh on daylight. Howsum, ther' ain't no argyin' the weather."

Tresler was watching his comrade closely. There was

something peculiar in his manner. He seemed almost fanciful, yet there was a wonderful alertness in the rapidity of his talk. He remained silent, and, presently, the other went on again, but he had switched off to a fresh topic.

"Say, I never ast you how you figgered to settle wi' Jake," he said. "I guess it'll be all—" he broke off, and glanced out prairiewards, but went on almost immediately, "—a settlin'. I've seen you kind o' riled. An' I've seen Jake." He stood up and peered into the darkness while he talked in his even monotone. "Yup," he went on, "ther's ways o' dealin' wi' men—an' ways. Guess, now, ef you wus dealin' wi' an honest citizen you'd jest talk him fair. Mind, I figger to know you a heap." His eyes suddenly turned on the man he was addressing, but returned almost at once to their earnest contemplation of the black vista of grassland. "You'd argy the point reas'nable, an' leave the gal to settle for you. But wi' Jake it's diff'rent." His hand slowly went round to his right hip, and suddenly he turned on his friend with a look of desperate meaning. "D'you know what it'll be 'tween you two? This is what it means;" and he whipped out the heavy six that had once been "Tough" McCulloch's, and levelled it at arm's length out prairiewards. Tresler thought it was coming at him, and sprang back, while Arizona laughed. "This is what it'll be. You'll take a careful aim, an' if you've friends around they'll see fair play, sure. I guess they'll count 'three' for you, so. Jest one, two, an' you'll both fire on the last, so. Three!"

There was a flash, and a sharp report, and then a cry split the still night air. Tresler sprang at the man whom he now believed was mad, but the cry stayed him, and the next moment he felt the grip of Arizona's sinewy hand on his arm, and was being dragged round the corral as the sound of horses hoofs came thundering towards him.

"It's them!"

It was the only explanation Arizona vouchsafed. They reached the horses and both sprang into the saddle, and the American's voice whispered hoarsely—

"Bend low. Guess these walls'll save us, an' we've got a sheer sight o' all the corral gates. Savee? Shoot careful, an' aim true. An' watch out on the bluff. The p'lice are around."

And now the inexperienced Tresler saw the whole scheme. The masterly generalship of his comrade filled him with admiration. And he had thought him ill, his brain turned! For some reason he believed the raiders were approaching, but not being absolutely sure, he had found an excuse for not turning in as usual, and cloaked all his suspicions for fear of giving a false alarm. And their present position was one of carefully considered strategy; the only possible one from which they could hope to achieve any advantage, for, sheltered, they yet had every gate of the corrals within gunshot.

But there was little time for reflection or speculation. If the police came, well and good. In the meantime a crowd of a dozen men had charged down upon the corrals, a silent, ghostly band; the only noise they made was the clatter of their horses' hoofs.

Both men, watching, were lying over their horses' necks. Arizona was the first to shoot. Again his gun belched a death-dealing shot. Tresler saw one figure reel and fall with a groan. Then his own gun was heard. His aim was less effective, and only brought a volley in reply from the raiders. That volley was the signal for the real battle to begin. The ambush of the two defenders was located, and the rustlers divided, and came sweeping round to the attack.

But Arizona was ready. Both horses wheeled round and raced out of their improvised fort, and, Tresler, following the keen-witted man, appreciated his resource as he darted into another angle between two other corrals. The darkness favoured them, and the rustlers swept by. Arizona only waited long enough for them to get well clear, then his gun rang out again, and Tresler's too. But the game was played out. A straggler sighted them and gave the alarm, and instantly the rest took up the chase.

"Round the corrals!"

As he spoke Arizona turned in his saddle and fired into the mob. A perfect hail of shots replied, and the bullets came singing all round them. He was as cool and deliberate as though he were hunting jack-rabbits. Tresler joined him in a fresh fusillade, and two more saddles were emptied, but the next moment a gasp told the American that his comrade was hit, and he turned only just in time to prevent him reeling out of the saddle.

"Hold up, boy!" he cried. "Kep your saddle if hell's let loose. I'll kep 'em busy."

And the wounded man, actuated by a similar spirit, sat bolt upright, while the two horses sped on. They were round at the front again. But though the American was as good as his word, and his gun was emptied and reloaded and emptied again, it was a hopeless contest—hopeless from the beginning. Tresler was bleeding seriously from a wound in his neck, and his aim was becoming more and more uncertain. But his will was fighting hard for mastery over his bodily weakness. Just as they headed again towards the bluff, Arizona gave a great yank at his reins and his pony was thrown upon its haunches. And the Lady Jezebel, too, as though working in concert with her mate, suddenly stopped dead.

The cause of the cowpuncher's action was a solitary horseman standing right ahead of them gazing out at the bluff. The American's gun was up in an instant, in spite of the pursuers behind. Death was in his eye as he took aim, but at that instant there was a shout from the bluff, and the cry was taken up behind him.—"P'lice!" That cry lost him his chance of fetching Red Mask down. Before he could let the hammer of his gun fall, the horseman had wheeled about and vanished in the darkness.

Simultaneously the pursuers swung out, turned, and the next moment were in full retreat under a perfect hail of carbine-fire from the police.

And as the latter followed in hot pursuit, Arizona hailed them—

"You've missed him; he's taken the river-bank for it. It's Red Mask! I see him."

But now Tresler needed all his friend's attention. Arizona saw him fall forward and lie clinging to his saddle-horn. He sprang to his aid, and, dismounting, lifted him gently to the ground. Then he turned his own horse loose, leading the Lady Jezebel while he supported the sick man up to the shack.

Here his patient fainted dead away, but he was equal to the emergency. He examined the wound, and found an ugly rent in the neck, whence the blood was pumping slowly. He saw at once that a small artery had been severed, and its adjacency to the jugular made it a matter of extreme danger. His medical skill was small, but he contrived to wash and bind the wound roughly. Then he quietly reloaded his guns, and, with the aid of a stiff horn of whisky, roused some life in his patient. He knew it would only be a feeble flicker, but while it lasted he wanted to get him on to the Lady Jezebel's back.

This he contrived after considerable difficulty. The mare resented the double burden, as was only to be expected. But the cowpuncher was desperate and knew how to handle her.

None but Arizona would have attempted such a feat with a horse of her description; but he must have speed if he was going to save his friend's life, and he knew she could give it.

CHAPTER XVI

WHAT LOVE WILL DO

DAYLIGHT was breaking when the jaded Lady Jezebel and her double freight raced into the ranch. The mare had done the journey in precisely two hours and a quarter. Arizona galloped her up to the house and rounded the lean-to in which Joe slept. Then he pulled up and shouted. Just then he had no thought for the rancher or Jake. He had thought for no one but Tresler.

His third shout brought Joe tumbling out of his bed.

"Say, I've got a mighty sick man here," he cried, directly he heard the choreman moving. "Git around an' lend a hand ; gentle, too."

"That you, Arizona?" Joe, half awake, questioned, blinking up at the horseman in the faint light.

"I guess ; an' say, 'fore I git answerin' no fool questions, git a holt on this notion. Red Mask's bin around Willow Bluff, an' Tresler's done up. Savee?"

"Tresler, did you say?" asked a girl's voice from the kitchen doorway. "Wounded?"

There was a world of fear in the questions, which were scarcely above a whisper.

Arizona was lifting Tresler down into Joe's arms. "I 'lows I didn't know you wus ther', missie," he replied, without turning from his task. "Careful, Joe ; easy—easy now. He's dreadful sick, I guess. Yes, missie, it's him. They've kind o' scratched him some. 'Tain't nothin' to gas about ; jest barked his neck. Kind o' needs a bit o' band'ge. Gorl

durn you, Joe! Git your arm under his shoulders an' kep his head steady; he'll git bleedin' to death ef y' ain't careful. Quiet, you jade!" he cried fiercely, to the mare whom Diane had frightened with her white robe as she came to help. "No, missie, not you," Arizona exclaimed. "He's all blood an' mussed up." Then he discovered that she had little on but a nightdress. "Gee! but you ain't wropped up, missie. Jest git right in. Wal," as she deliberately proceeded to help the struggling Joe, "ef you will; but Joe ken do it, I guess. Ther', that's it. I ken git off'n this crazy slut of a mare now."

Directly Arizona had quit the saddle he relieved Diane, and, with the utmost gentleness, started to take the sick man into the lean-to. But the girl protested at once.

"Not in there," she said sharply. "Take him into the house. I'll go and fix a bed upstairs. Bring him through the kitchen."

She spoke quite calmly. Too calmly, Joe thought.

"To that house?" Arizona protested.

"Yes, yes, of course." Then the passion of grief let itself loose, and Diane cried, "And why not? Where else should he go? He belongs to me. Why do you stand there like an imbecile? Take him at once. Oh, Jack, Jack, why don't you speak? Oh, take him quickly! You said he would bleed to death. He isn't dead? No, tell me he isn't dead?"

"Dead? Dead? Ha, ha!" Arizona threw all the scorn he was capable of into the words, and laughed with funereal gravity. "Say, that's real good—real good. Him dead? Wal, I guess not. Pshaw! Say, missie, you ain't ast after my health, an' I'm guessin' I oughter be sicker'n him, wi' that mare o' his. Say, jest git right ahead an' fix that bunk fer him, like the daisy gal you are. What about bl—your father, missie?"

"Never mind father. Come along."

The man's horse-like attempt at lightness had its effect. The girl pulled herself together. She realized the emergency. She knew that Tresler needed her help. Arizona's manner had only emphasized the gravity of his case.

She ran on ahead, and the other, bearing the unconscious man, followed.

"Never mind father," Arizona muttered doubtfully. "Wal, here goes." Then he called back to Joe: "Git around that mare an' sling the saddle on a fresh plug; guess I'll need it."

He passed through the kitchen, and stepping into the hall he was startled by the apparition of the blind man standing in the doorway of his bedroom. He was clad in his customary dressing-gown, and his eyes glowed ruddily in the light of the kitchen lamp.

"What's this?" he asked sharply.

"Tresler's bin done up," Arizona replied at once. "Guess the gang got around Willow Bluff—God's curse light on 'em!"

"Hah! And where are you taking him?"

"Upsta'rs," was the brief reply. Then the cowpuncher bethought him of his duty to his employer. "Guess the cattle are safe, fer which you ken thank them p'lice fellers. Miss Dianny's hustlin' a bunk fer him," he added.

In spite of his usual assurance, Arizona never felt easy with this man. Now the rancher's manner decidedly thawed.

"Yes, yes," he said gently. "Take the poor boy upstairs. You'd better go for the doctor. You can give me the details afterwards."

He turned back into his room, and the other passed up the stairs.

He laid the sick man on the bed, and pointed out to the girl the bandage on his neck, advising, in his practical fashion, its readjustment. Then he went swiftly from the house and rode into Forks for Doc. Osler, the veterinary surgeon, the only available medical man in that part of the country.

When Diane found herself alone with the man she loved stretched out before her, inert, like one dead, her first inclination was to sit down and weep for him. She could face her own troubles with a certain fortitude, but to see this strong

man laid low, perhaps dying, was a different thing, and her womanly weakness was near to overcoming her. But though the unshed tears filled her eyes, her love brought its courage to her aid, and she approached the task Arizona had pointed out.

With deft fingers she removed the sodden bandage, through which the blood was slowly oozing. The flow, which at once began again, alarmed her, and set her swiftly to work. Now she understood as well as Arizona did what was amiss. She hurried out to her own room, and returned quickly with materials for rebandaging, and her arms full of clothes. Then, with the greatest care, she proceeded to bind up the neck, placing a cork on the artery below the severance. This she strapped down so tightly that, for the time at least, the bleeding was staunched. Her object accomplished, she proceeded to dress herself ready for the doctor's coming.

She had taken her place at the bedside, and was meditating on what further could be done for her patient, when an event happened on which she had in nowise reckoned. Somebody was ascending the stair with the shuffling gait of one feeling his way. It was her father. The first time within her memory that he had visited the upper part of the house.

A look of alarm leapt into her eyes as she gazed at the door, watching for his coming, and she realized only too well the possibilities of the situation. What would he say? What would he do?

A moment later she was facing him with calm courage. Her fears had been stifled by the knowledge of her lover's helplessness. One look at his dear, unconscious form had done for her what nothing else could have done. Her filial duty went out like a candle snuffed with wet fingers. There was not even a spark left.

Julian Marbolt stepped across the threshold, and his head slowly moved round as though to ascertain in what direction his daughter was sitting. The oil-lamp seemed to attract his blind attention, and his eyes fixed themselves upon it; but for

a moment only. Then they passed on until they settled on the girl.

"Where is he?" he asked coldly. "I can hear you breathing. Is he dead?"

Diane sprang up and bent over her patient. "No," she said, half fearing that her father's inquiry was prophetic. "He is unconscious from loss of blood. Arizona——"

"Tchah! Arizona!—I want to talk to you. Here, give me your hand and lead me to the bedside. I will sit there. This place is unfamiliar."

Diane did as she was bid. She was pale. A strained look was in her soft brown eyes, but there was determination in the set of her lips.

"What is the matter with you, girl?" her father asked. The softness of his speech in no way disguised the iciness of his manner. "You're shaking."

"There's nothing the matter with me," she replied pointedly.

"Ah, thinking of him." His hand reached out until it rested on one of Tresler's legs. His remark seemed to require no answer, and a silence fell while Diane watched the eyes so steadily directed upon the sick man. Presently he went on. "These men have done well. They have saved the cattle. Arizona mentioned the police. I don't know much about it yet, but it seems to me this boy must have contrived their assistance. Smart work, if he did so."

"Yes, father, and brave," added the girl in a low tone.

His words had raised hope within her. But with his next he dashed it.

"Brave? It was his duty," he snapped, resentful immediately. The red eyes were turned upon his daughter, and she fancied she saw something utterly cruel in their painful depths. "You are uncommonly interested," he went on slowly. "I was warned before that he and you were too thick. I told you of it—cautioned you. Isn't that sufficient, or have I to——" He left his threat unfinished.

A colour flushed slowly into Diane's cheeks and her eyes sparkled.

"No, it isn't sufficient, father. You have no right to stop me speaking to Mr. Tresler. I have bowed to your decision with regard to the other men on the ranch. There, perhaps, you had right—a parent's right. But it is different with Mr. Tresler. He is a gentleman. As for character, you yourself admit it is unimpeachable. Then what right have you to refuse to allow me even speech with him? It is absurd, tyrannical; and I refuse to obey you."

The frowning brows drew sharply down over the man's eyes. And Diane understood the sudden rising of storm behind his mask-like face. She waited with a desperate calmness. It was the moral bravery prompted by her new-born love.

But the storm held off, controlled by that indomitable will which made Julian Marbolt an object of fear to all who came into contact with him.

"You are an ungrateful girl, a foolish girl," he said quietly. "You are ungrateful that you refuse to obey me; and foolish, that you think to marry him."

Diane sprang to her feet. "I—how——"

"Tut! Do not protest. I know you have promised to be his wife. If you denied it you would lie." He sat for a moment enjoying the girl's discomfort. Then he went on, with a cruel smile about his lips as she returned to her seat with a movement that was almost a collapse. "That's better," he said, following her action by means of his wonderful instinct. "Now let us be sensible—very sensible."

His tone had become persuasive, such as might have been used to a child, and the girl wondered what further cruelty it masked. She had not long to wait.

"You are going to give up this madness," he said coldly. "You will show yourself amenable to reason—my reason—or I shall enforce my demands in another way."

The girl's exasperation was growing with each moment, but she kept silence, waiting for him to finish.

"You will never marry this man," he went on, with quiet emphasis. "Nor any other man while I live. There is no marriage for you, my girl. There can be no marriage for you. And the more 'unimpeachable' a man's character the less the possibility."

"I don't pretend to understand you," Diane replied, with a coldness equal to her father's own.

"No!; perhaps you don't. Ha, ha!" The man chuckled fiendishly.

Tears sprang into the girl's eyes. She could no longer check them. And with them came the protest that she was also powerless to withhold.

"Why may I not marry? Why can I not marry? Surely I can claim the right of every woman to marry the man of her choice. I know you have no good will for me, father. Why, I cannot understand. I have always obeyed you; I have ever striven to do my duty. If there has never been any great affection displayed it is not my fault. For, ever since I can remember, you have done your best to kill the love I would have given you. How have I been ungrateful? What have I to be grateful for? I cannot remember one single kindness you have ever shown me. You have set up a barrier between me and the world outside this ranch. I am a prisoner here. Why? Am I so hateful? Have I no claims on your toleration? Am I not your own flesh and blood?"

"No!"

The man's answer came with staggering force. It was the bursting of the storm of passion, which even his will could no longer restrain. But it was the whole storm, for he went no further. It was Diane who spoke next. Her cheeks had assumed an ashen hue, and her lips trembled so that she could scarcely frame her words.

"What do you mean?" she gasped.

"Tut! Your crazy obstinacy drives me to it," her father answered impatiently, but with perfect control. "Oh, you

need have no fear. There is no legal shame to you. But there is that which will hit you harder, I think."

"God! What are you saying?"

Something of the man's meaning was growing upon her. Old hints and innuendoes against her mother were recalled by his words. Her throat parched while she watched the relentless face of this man who was still her father.

"Saying? You know the story of my blindness. You know I spent three years visiting nearly every eye-doctor in Europe. But what you don't know, and shall know, is that I returned home to Jamaica at the end of that time to find myself the father of a three-days'-old baby girl." The man's teeth were clenched, rage and pain distorted his face, rendering his sightless stare a hideous thing. "Yes," he went on, but now more to himself, "I returned home to that, and in time to hear the last words your mother uttered in life; in time to feel—feel her death-struggles." He mouthed his words with unmistakable relish, and relapsed into silence.

Diane fell back with a bitter cry. The cry roused her father.

"Well?" he continued. "You'll give this man up—now?"

For some minutes there was no answer. The girl sat like a statue carved in dead white stone; and the expression of her face was as stony as the mould of her features. Her blood was chilled; her brain refused its office; and her heart—it was as though that fount of life lay crushed within her bosom. Even the man lying sick on the bed beside her had no meaning for her.

"Well?" her father demanded impatiently. "You are going to give Tresler up now?"

She heard him this time. With a rush everything came to her, and a feeling of utter helplessness swept over her. Oh the shame of it! Suddenly she flung forward on the bed and sobbed her heart out beside the man she must give up. He had been the one bright ray in the dull grey of her life. His love, come so quickly, so suddenly, to her had leavened the

memory of her unloved years. Their recollection had been thrust into the background to give place to the sunshine of a precious first love. And now it must all go. There was no other course open to her, she told herself; and in this decision was revealed her father's consummate devilishness. He understood her straightforward pride, if he had no appreciation of it. Then, suddenly, there came a feeling of resentment and hatred for the author of her misfortune, and she sat up with the tears only half dry on her cheeks. Her father's dead eyes were upon her, and their hateful depths seemed to be searching her. She knew she must submit to his will. He mastered her as he mastered everybody else.

"It is not what I will," she said, in a low voice. "I understand; our lives must remain apart." Then anger brought harshness into her tone. "I would have given him up of my own accord had I known. I could not have thrust the shame of my birth upon him. But you—you have kept this from me all these years, saving it, in your heartless way, for such a moment as this. Why have you told me? Why do you keep me at your side? Oh, I hate you!"

"Yes, yes, of course you do," her father said, quite unmoved by her attack. "Now you are tasting something—only something—of the bitterness of my life. And it is good that you should. The parent's sins—the children. Yes, you certainly can feel——"

"For Heaven's sake leave me!" the girl broke in, unable to stand the taunting—the hideous enjoyment of the man.

"Not yet; I haven't done. This man——" The rancher leant over the bed, and one hand felt its way over Tresler's body until it rested over his heart. "At one time I was glad he came here. I had reasons. His money was as good as in my pocket. He would have bought stock from me at a goodish profit. Now I have changed my mind. I would sacrifice that. It would be better perhaps—perhaps. No, he is not dead yet. But he may die, eh, Diane? It would be better were he to die; it would save your explanation to him.

Yes, let him die. You are not going to marry him. You would not care to see him marry another, as, of course, he will. Let him die. Love? Love? Why, it would be kindness to yourselves. Yes, let him die."

"You—you—wretch!" Diane was on her feet, and her eyes blazed down upon the cruel, working face before her. The cry was literally wrung from her. "And that is the man who was ready to give his life for your interests. That is the man whose cleverness and bravery you even praised. You want me to refuse him the trifling aid I can give him. You are a monster! You have parted us, but it is not sufficient; you want his life."

She suddenly bent over and seized her father's hand, where it rested upon Tresler's heart, and dragged it away.

"Take your hand off him; don't touch him!" she cried in a frenzy. "You are not——"

But she got no further. The lean, sinewy hand had closed over hers, and held them both as in a vice; and the pressure made her cry out.

"Listen!" he said fiercely. He, too, was standing now, and his tall figure dwarfed hers. "He is to be moved out of here. I will have Jake see to it in the morning. And you shall know what it is to thwart me if you dare to interfere."

He abruptly released her hands and turned away; but he shot round again as he heard her reply—

"I shall nurse him," she said.

"You will not."

The girl laughed hysterically. The scene had been too much for her, and she was on the verge of breaking down.

"We shall see," she cried after him, as he passed out of the room.

The whole ranch was astir when Arizona returned with Doc Osler. Nor did they come alone. Fyles had met them on the trail. He had just returned from a fruitless pursuit of the raiders. He had personally endeavoured to track Red Mask, but the rustler had evaded him in the thick bush that lined the

river; and the troopers had been equally unsuccessful with the rest of the band. The hills had been their goal, and they had made it through the excellence of their horses. Although the police were well mounted their cattle were heavier, and lost ground hopelessly in the midst of the broken land of the foothills.

Jake was closeted with the rancher at the coming of the doctor and his companions; but their confabulation was brought to an abrupt termination at once.

The doctor went to the wounded man, who still remained unconscious, while Fyles joined the rancher and his foreman in a discussion of the night's doings. And while these things were going on Arizona and Joe shared the hospitality of the leanto.

The meeting in the rancher's den had not proceeded far when a summons from upstairs cut it short. Diane brought a message from the doctor asking her father and the police-sergeant to join him. Marbolt displayed unusual alacrity, and Fyles followed him as he tapped his way up to the sick-room. Here the stick was abandoned, and he was led to his seat by his daughter. Diane was pale, but alert and determined; while her father wore a gentle look of the utmost concern. The doctor was standing beside the window gazing out over the pastures, but he turned at once as they came in.

"A nasty case, Mr. Marbolt," he said, the moment the rancher had taken up his position. "A very nasty case." He was a brusque little man with a pair of keen black eyes, which he turned on the blind man curiously. "An artery cut by bullet. Small artery. Your daughter most cleverly stopped bleeding. Many thanks to her. Patient lost gallons of blood. Precarious position—very. No danger from wound now. Exhaustion only. Should he bleed again—death. But he won't; artery tied up securely. Miss Marbolt says you desire patient removed to usual quarters. I say no! Remove him—artery break afresh—death. Sergeant Fyles, I order distinctly this man remains where he is. Am I right? Have I right?"

"Undoubtedly." Then the officer turned upon the blind man. "His orders are your law, Mr. Marbolt," he said. "And you, of course, will be held responsible for any violation of them."

The blind man nodded in acquiescence.

"Good," said the doctor, rubbing his hands. "Nothing more for me now. Return to-morrow. Miss Marbolt, admirable nurse. Wish I was patient. He will be about again in two weeks. Artery small. Health good—young. Oh yes, no fear. Only exhaustion. Hope you catch villains. Good morning. Might have severed jugular—near shave."

Doc. Osler bowed to the girl and passed out muttering, "Capital nurse—beautiful." His departure brought the rancher to his feet, and he groped his way to the door. As he passed his daughter he paused and gently patted her on the back.

"Ah, child," he said, with a world of tolerant kindness in his voice, "I still think you are wrong. He would have been far better in his own quarters, his familiar surroundings, and amongst his friends. You are quite inexperienced, and these men understand bullet wounds as well as any doctor. However, have your way. I hope you won't have cause to regret it."

"All right, father," Diane replied, without turning her eyes from the contemplation of her sick lover.

And Fyles, standing at the foot of the bed watching the scene, speculated shrewdly as to the relations in which the girl and her patient stood, and the possible parental disapproval of the same. Certainly he had no idea of the matters which had led up to the necessity for his official services to enforce the doctor's orders.

CHAPTER XVII

THE LIGHTED LAMP

DIANE was by no means satisfied with her small victory. She had gained her point, it is true, but she had gained it by means which gave no promise of a happy outcome to her purpose.

Left alone with her patient she had little to do but reflect on her position, and her thoughts brought her many a sigh, much heart-racking and anxiety. For herself she allowed little thought. Her mind was made up as to her future. Her love was to be snatched away while yet the first sweet glamour of it was upon her. Every hope, every little castle she had raised in her maiden thoughts, had been ruthlessly shattered, and the outlook of her future was one dull grey vista of hopelessness. It was the old order accentuated, and the pain of it gripped her heart with every moment she gave to its contemplation. Happily the life she had lived had strengthened her; she was not the girl to weep at every ill that befell. The first shock had driven her to tears, but that had passed. She was of a nature that can suffer bravely, and face the world dry-eyed, gently, keeping the bitterness of her lot to herself, and hiding her own pain under an earnest attempt to help others.

Tresler was her all; and that all meant far more than mere earthly love. To her he was something that must be cherished as a priceless gem entrusted to her care, and his honour was more sacred to her than her own. Therefore all personal considerations must be passed over, and she must give him up.

But if his honour were safe in her keeping, his personal safety was another matter. In pitting herself against her parent's will she fully realized the danger she was incurring. Therefore she racked her sorely taxed brain for the best means of safeguarding her charge.

She hardly knew what she feared. There was no real danger she could think of, but her instinct warned her to watchfulness, to be prepared for anything. She felt sure that her father would seek some means of circumventing the police officer's mandate. What form would his attempt take?

After half an hour's hard thinking she made up her mind to consult her wise old counsellor, Joe, and enlist his aid. With this object in view she went downstairs and visited the leanto. Here she found both Arizona and Joe. Arizona was waiting a summons from the rancher, who was still busy with Jake and Sergeant Fyles. At first she thought of consulting her adviser privately, but finally decided to take both men into her confidence; and this the more readily since she knew her lover's liking for the hot-headed American.

Both men stood up as she entered. Arizona dragged his slouch hat off with clumsy haste.

"Boys," the girl said at once, "I've come to ask you for a little help."

"Makes me glad, missie," said the cowpuncher, with alacrity.

Joe contented himself with an upward glance of inquiry.

Diane nodded with an assumption of brightness.

"Well, it's this," she said. "Jack mustn't be left for the next few days. Now, I am his nurse, but I have household duties to perform and shall be forced to leave him at times. You, Arizona, won't be able to do anything in the daytime, because you are occupied on the ranch. But I thought you, Joe, could help me by being in the kitchen as much as possible. You see, in the kitchen you can hear the least sound coming from upstairs. The room is directly overhead. In that way I shall be free to do my house."

"Guess you had trouble fixin' him upstairs?" Joe inquired slowly. "Doc. Osler wus sayin' somethin' 'fore he went."

Diane turned away. The shrewd old eyes were reading her like a book.

"Yes, father wanted him put in the bunkhouse."

"Ah." Joe's twisted face took on a curious look. "Yes, I guess I ken do that. What's to happen o' night time?"

"Oh, I can sit up with him. The night is all right," the girl returned easily.

"Guess we'd best take it turn about like," Joe suggested.

"No, it wouldn't do."

"Guess it wouldn't do. That's so," the other observed thoughtfully. "Howsum, I ken set around the kitchen o' nights. I shan't need no lights. Ye' see, wi' the door open right into the hall ther' ain't no sound but what I'll hear."

The man's meaning was plain enough, but the girl would not take it.

"No," she said, "it's in the daytime I want you."

"Daytime? I guess that's fixed." Joe looked up dissatisfied.

At this juncture Arizona broke in with a scheme for his own usefulness.

"Say, missie, any time o' night you jest tap hard on that windy I'll know you want the doc. fetchin'. An' I'll come right along up an' git orders. I'll be waitin' around."

The girl looked him squarely in the eyes, seeking the meaning that lay behind his words. But the man's expression was sphinx-like. She felt that these rough creatures, instead of acting as advisors, had assumed the responsibilities she had only asked their assistance in.

"You are good fellows both. I can't thank you; but you've taken a weight off my mind."

"Ther' ain't no thanks, missie. I figger as a doc. is an' a'mighty ne'sary thing when a feller's sick," observed Arizona, quietly.

"Spec'ally at night time," put in Joe, seriously.

"I'll get back to my patient," Diane said abruptly. And as she flitted away to the house the men heard the heavy tread of Jake coming round the leanto, and understood the hastiness of her retreat.

The next minute the foreman had summoned Arizona to the rancher's presence.

Diane had done well to enlist the help of these men. Without some aid it would have been impossible to look after Tresler. She feared her father, as well she might. What would be easier than for him to get her out of the way, and then have Jake deport her patient to the bunkhouse? Doc. Osler's threats of life or death had been exaggerated to help her carry her point, she knew, and, also, she fully realized that her father understood this was so. He was not the man to be scared of any bogey like that. Besides, his parting words, so gentle, so kindly; she had grown to distrust him most in his gentler moods.

All that day, assisted by Joe, she watched at the sick-bed. Tresler was never left for long; and when it was absolutely necessary to leave him Joe's sharp ears were straining for any alarming sound, and, unauthorized by Diane, his eyes were on the hallway, watching the rancher's bedroom door. He had no compunction in admitting his fears to himself. He had wormed the whole story of the rancher's anger at Tresler's presence in the house from his young mistress, and, also, he understood that Diane's engagement to her patient was known to her father. Therefore his lynx eyes never closed, his keen ears were ever strained, and he moved about with a gun in his hip-pocket. He didn't know what might happen, but his movements conveyed his opinion of the man with whom they had to deal. Arizona had been despatched with Sergeant Fyles to Willow Bluff. There were wounded men there to be identified, and the officer wanted his aid in examining the battle-field.

"But he'll git around to-night," Joe had said, after bringing the news to Diane. "Sure—sure as pinewood breeds the bugs."

And the girl was satisfied. The day wore on, and night brought no fresh anxiety. Diane was at her post, Joe was alert, and though no one had heard of Arizona's return, twice, in the small hours, the choreman heard a footfall outside his leanto, and he made a shrewd guess as to whose it was.

The second and third day passed satisfactorily, but still Tresler displayed no sign of life. He lay on the bed just as he had been originally placed there. Each day the brusque little doctor drove out from Forks, and each day he went back leaving little encouragement behind him. Before he went away, after his third visit, he shook his head gravely in response to the nurse's eager inquiries.

"He's got to get busy soon," he said, as he returned his liniments and medical stores to his bag. "Don't like it. Bad—very bad. Nature exhausting. He must rouse soon—or death. Three days—Tut, tut! Still no sign. Cheer up, nurse. Give him three more. Then drastic treatment. Won't come till he wakes—no use. Send for me. Good girl. Stick to it. Sorry. Good-bye."

And patting Diane on the back the man hustled out in his jerky fashion, leaving her weeping over the verdict he had left behind.

It was the strain of watching that had unnerved her. She was bodily and mentally weary. Her eyes and head ached with the seemingly endless vigil. Three days and nights and barely six hours' sleep over all, and those only snatched at broken intervals.

And now another night confronted her. So overwrought was she that she even thought of seeking the aid old Joe had proffered. She thought quite seriously of it for some moments. Could she not smuggle him upstairs after her father had had his supper and retired to his bedroom? She had no idea that Joe had, secretly, spent almost as much time on the watch as she had done. However, she came to no actual decision, and went wearily down and prepared the evening meal. She waited on the blind man in her usual patient, silent manner,

and afterwards went back to the kitchen and prepared to face the long dreary night.

Joe was just finishing the washing-up. He was longer over it than usual, though he had acquired a wonderful proficiency in his culinary duties since he was first employed on the ranch. Diane paid little heed to him, and as soon as her share of the work was finished, prepared to retire upstairs.

"There's just the sweeping up, Joe," she said. "When you've finished that we are through. I must go up to him."

Joe glanced round from his washing-trough, but went on with his work.

"He ain't showed no sign, Miss Dianny?" he asked eagerly.

"No, Joe."

The girl spoke almost in a whisper, leaning against the table with a deep sigh of weariness.

"Say, Miss Dianny," the little man suggested softly, "that doc. feller said mebbe he'd give him three days. It's a real long spell. Seems to me you'll need to be up an' around come that time."

"Oh, I shall be 'up and around,' Joe."

The grizzled old head shook doubtfully, and he moved away from his trough, drying his hands, and came over to where she was standing.

"Say, I jest can't sleep noways. I'm like that, I guess. I git spells. I wus kind o' thinkin' mebbe I'd set around like. A good night's slep 'ud fix you right. I've heerd tell as folks kind o' influences their patiences some. You bein' tired, an' sleppy, an' mis'erble, now mebbe that's jest wot's keppin' him back——"

Diane shook her head. She saw through his roundabout subterfuge, and its kindness touched her.

"No, no, Joe," she said almost tenderly. "Not on your life. You would give me your last crust if you were starving. You are doing all, and more than any one else would do for me, and I will accept nothing further."

"You're figgerin' wrong," he retorted quite harshly. "'Tain't fer you. No, no, it's fer him. Y'see we're kind o' dependin' on him, Arizona an' me——"

"What for?" the girl asked quietly.

"Wal, y'see—wal—it's like this. He's goin' to be a rancher. Yes, don't y'see?" he asked, with a pitiful attempt at a knowing leer.

"No, I don't."

"Say, mebbe Arizona an' me 'll git a nice little job—a nice little job. Eh?"

"You are talking nonsense, and you know it."

"Eh? what?"

The little man stood abashed at the girl's tone.

"You're only saying all this to get me to sleep to-night, instead of sitting up. Well, I'm not going to. You thinking of mercenary things like that. Oh, Joe, it's almost funny."

Joe's face flushed as far as it was capable of flushing.

"Wal," he said, "I jest thought ther' wa'an't no use in two o' us settin' up."

"Nor is there. I'm going to do it. You've made me feel quite fresh with your silly talk."

"Ah, mebbe. Guess I'll swep up."

Diane took the hint and went upstairs, her eyes brimming with tears. In her present state of unhappiness Joe's utter unselfishness was more than she could bear.

She took her place at the bedside, determined to sit there as long as she could keep awake, afterwards she would adopt a "sentry-go" in the passage. For an hour she battled with sleep. She kept her eyes open, but her senses were dull and she passed the time in a sort of dream, a nasty, fanciful dream, in which Tresler was lying dead on the bed beside her, and she was going through the agony of realization. She was mourning him, living on in the dreary round of her life under her father's roof, listening to his daily sneers, and submitting to his studied cruelties. No doubt this waking dream would have continued until real sleep had stolen upon her unawares,

but, after an hour, something occurred to fully arouse her. There was a distinct movement on the bed. Tresler had suddenly drawn up one arm, which, almost immediately, fell again on the coverlet, as though the spasmodic movement had been uncontrolled by any power either mental or physical.

She was on her feet in an instant, bending over him ready to administer the drugs Doc. Osler had left with her. And by the light of the shaded lamp she saw a distinct change in the pallor of his face. It was no longer death-like; there was a tinge of life, however faint, in the drawn features. And as she beheld it she could have cried aloud in her joy.

She administered the restoratives and returned to her seat with a fast-beating heart. And suddenly she remembered with alarm how near sleep she had been. She rose abruptly and began to pace the room. The moment was a critical one. Her lover might regain consciousness at any time. And with this thought came an access of caution. She went out on the landing and looked at the head of the stairs. Then she crept back. An inspiration had come to her. She would barricade the approach, and though even to herself she did not admit the thought, it was the recollection of her father's blindness that prompted her.

Taking two chairs she propped them at the head of the stairs in such a position that the least accidental touch would topple them headlong. The scheme appealed to her. Then, dreading sleep more than ever, she took up her "sentry-go" on the landing, glancing in at the sick-room at every turn in her walk.

The hours dragged wearily on. Tresler gave no further sign. It was after midnight, and the girl's eyes refused to keep open any longer; added to which she frequently stumbled as she paced to and fro. In desperation she fetched the lamp from the sick-room and passed into her own, and bathed her face in cold water. Then she busied herself with tidying the place up. Anything to keep herself awake. After awhile, feeling better, she sat on the edge of her bed to rest. It was a fatal mistake.

Her eyes closed against all effort of will. She was helpless. Nothing could have stopped her. Exhausted nature claimed her—and she slept.

And Tresler was rousing. His constitution had asserted itself, and the restorative Diane had administered was doing the rest. He moved several times, but as yet his strength was insufficient to rouse him to full consciousness. He lay there with his brain struggling against his overwhelming weakness. Thought was hard at work with the mistiness of dreaming. He was half aware that he was stretched out upon a bed, yet it seemed to him that he was bound down with fetters of iron, which resisted his wildest efforts to break. It seemed to him that he was struggling fiercely, and that Jake was looking on mocking him. At last, utterly weary and exhausted he gave up trying and called upon Arizona. He shouted loudly, but he could not hear his own voice; he shouted again and again, raising his screams to a fearful pitch, but still no sound came. Then he thought that Jake went away, and he was left utterly alone. He lay quite still waiting, and presently he realized that he was stretched out on the prairie, staked down to the ground by shackles securing his hands and feet; and the moon was shining, and he could hear the distant sound of the coyotes and prairie dogs. This brought him to a full understanding. His enemies had done this thing so that he should be eaten alive by the starving scavengers of the prairie. He pondered long; wondering, as the cries of the coyotes drew nearer, how long it would be before the first of the loathsome creatures would attack him. Now he could see their forms in the moonlight. They came slowly, slowly. One much bigger than the rest was leading; and as the creature drew near he saw that it had the face of the rancher, whose blind eyes shone out like two coals of fire in the moonlight. It reared itself on its hind legs, and to his utter astonishment, as this man-wolf stood gazing down upon him, he saw that it was wearing the dressing-gown in which the rancher always appeared. It was a weird apparition and the shackled man felt the force of

those savage, glowing eyes, gazing so cruelly into his. But there could be no resistance, he was utterly at the creature's mercy. He saw the gleaming teeth bared in anticipation of the meal awaiting it, but, with wolf-like cunning, the creature dissembled. It moved around, gazing in every direction to see that the coast was clear, it paused and stood listening; then it came on. Now it was standing near him, and he could feel the warmth of its reeking breath blowing on his face. Lower drooped its head, and its front feet, which he recognized as hands, were placed upon his neck. Then a faint and distant voice reached him, and he knew that this wolf-man was speaking. "So you'd marry her," it said. "You! But we'll take no chances—no chances. I could tear your throat out, but I won't; no, I won't do that. A little blood—just a little." And then the dreaming man felt the fingers moving about his throat. They felt cold and clammy, and the night air chilled him.

Then came a change, one of those fantastic changes which dreamland loves, and which drives the dreamer, even in his sleeping thought, nearly distracted. The dark vista of the prairie suddenly lit. A great light shone over all, and the dreaming man could see nothing but the light—that, and the wolf-man. The ghoulish creature stood its ground. The fingers were still at his throat, but now they moved uncertainly, groping. There was no longer the deliberate movement of set purpose. It was as though the light had blinded the cruel scavenger. That its purpose was foiled through its power of vision being suddenly destroyed. It was a breathless moment in the dream.

But the tension quickly relaxed. The hands were drawn abruptly away. The wolf-man stood erect again, and the dreamer heard it addressing the light. The words were gentle, in contrast with the manner in which it had spoken to him, and the softness of its tones held him fascinated.

"He's better, eh? Coming round," he said. And somehow the dreamer thought that he laughed, and the invisible coyotes laughed with him.

A brief silence followed, which was ultimately broken by another voice. It was a voice from out of the light, and its tones were a gasp of astonishment and alarm.

"What are you doing here, father?" the voice asked. There was a strange familiarity in the tones, and the dreamer struggled for recollection; but before it came to him the voice went on with a wild exclamation of horror. "God! The bandage!"

The dreamer wondered; and something drew his attention to the wolf-man. He saw that the creature was eyeing the light with ferocious purpose in its expression. It was all so real that he felt a wild thrill of excitement as he watched for what was to happen. But the voice out of the light again spoke, and he found himself listening.

"Go!" it said in a tone of command, and thrilling with horror and indignation. "Go! or—no, dare to lay a hand on me, and I'll dash the lamp in your face! Go now! or I will summon help. It is at hand, below. And armed help."

There was a pause. The wolf-man stared at the light with its villainous eyes, but the contemplated attack was not forthcoming. The creature muttered something which the dreamer lost. Then it moved away; not as it had come, but groping its way blindly. A moment later the light went out too, the cries of the coyotes were hushed, and the moon shone down on the scene as before. And the dreamer, still feeling himself imprisoned, watched the great yellow globe until it disappeared below the horizon. Then, as the darkness closed over him, he seemed to sleep, for the scene died out and recollection faded away.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE RENUNCIATION

THE early morning sun was streaming in through the window of the sick man's room when Tresler at last awoke to consciousness. And, curiously enough, more than half an hour passed before Diane became aware of the change in her patient.

And yet she was wideawake too. Sleep had never been further from her eyes, and her mind never more alert. But for the first time since Tresler had been brought in wounded, his condition was no longer first in her thoughts. Something occupied her at the moment of his waking to the exclusion of all else.

The man lay like a log. His eyes were staring up at the ceiling ; he made no movement, and though perfect consciousness had come to him there was no interest with it, no inquiry. He accepted his position like an infant waking from its healthy night-long slumber. Truth to tell, his weakness held him prisoner, sapping all natural inclination from mind and body. All his awakening brought him was a hazy, indifferent recollection of a bad dream ; that, and a background of the events at Willow Bluff.

If the man were suffering from a bad dream, the girl's expression suggested the terrible reality of her thought. There was something worse than horror in her eyes, in the puckering of her brows, in the nervous compression of her lips. There was a blending of terror and bewilderment in the brown depths

that contemplated the wall before her, and every now and then her pretty figure moved with a palpable shudder. Her thoughts were reviewing feverishly scenes similar to those in her patient's dream, only with her they were terrible realities which she had witnessed only a few hours before in that very room. At that moment she would have given her life to have been able to call them dreams. Her lover's life had been attempted by the inhuman process of reopening his wound.

Should she ever forget the dreadful scene? Never! Not once, but time and again her brain pictured each detail with a distinctness that was in the nature of physical pain. From the moment she awoke, which had been unaccountable to her, to find herself still propped against the foot-rail of her bed, to the finish of the dastardly scene in the sick-room was a living nightmare. She remembered the start with which she had opened her eyes. As far as she knew she had heard nothing; nothing had disturbed her. And yet she found herself sitting bolt upright, awake, listening, intent. Then her rush to the lamp. Her guilty feelings. The unconscious stealth of her tip-toeing to the landing outside. Her horror at the discovery that her obstruction to the staircase had been removed, and the chairs, as though to mock the puerility of her scheming, set in orderly fashion, side by side, against the wall to make way for the midnight intruder. The closed door of the sick-room, which yielded to her touch and revealed the apparition of her father bending over her lover, and, with no uncertainty of movement, removing the bandage from the wounded neck. The terror of it all remained. So long as she lived she could never forget one single detail of it.

Even now, though hours had passed since these things had happened, the nervousness with which she had finally approached the task of readjusting the bandage still possessed her. And even the thankfulness with which she discovered that the intended injury had been frustrated was inadequate to bring her more than a passing satisfaction. She shuddered, and nervously turned to her patient.

Then it was that she became aware of his return to life.

"Jack! Oh, thank God!" she murmured softly.

And the sound of the well-loved voice roused the patient's interest in the things about him.

"Where am I?" he asked, in a weak whisper, turning his eyes to the face so anxiously regarding him.

But Diane's troubles had been lifted from her shoulders for the moment and the nurse was uppermost once more. She signed to him to keep quiet while she administered the doses Doc. Osler had prepared for him. Then she answered his question.

"You are in the room adjoining mine," she said quietly.

Her woman's instinct warned her that no more reassuring information could be given him.

And the result justified it. He smiled faintly, and, in a few moments, his eyes closed again and he slept.

Then the girl set about her work in earnest. She hurried downstairs and communicated the good news to Joe. She went in search of Jake, to have a man despatched for the doctor. For the time at least all her troubles were forgotten in her thankfulness at her lover's return to life. Somehow, as she passed out of the house, the very sunlight seemed to rejoice with her; the old familiar buildings had something friendly in their bald, unyielding aspect. Even the hideous corrals looked less like the prisons they were, and the branding forges less cruel. But greatest wonder of all was the attitude of Jake when she put her request before him. The giant smiled upon her and granted it without demur. And, in her gladness, the simple child smiled back her heartfelt thanks. But her smile was short-lived, and her thanks were premature.

"I'm pretty nigh glad that feller's mendin'," Jake said. "Say, he's a man, that feller." He turned his eyes away and avoided her smiling gaze, and continued in a tone he tried to make regretful. "Guess I was gettin' to feel mean about him. We haven't hit it exac'ly. I allow it's mostly temper between us. Howsum, I guess it can't be helped now—now he's goin'."

"Going?" the girl inquired. But she knew he would be going, only she wondered what Jake meant.

"Sure," the foreman said, with a sudden return to his usual manner. "Say, your father's up against him good and hot. I've seen Julian Marbolt mad—madder'n hell; but I ain't never seen him jest as mad as he is against your beau. When Tresler gits right he's got to quit—quick. I've been wonderin' what's fixed your father like that. Guess, you ain't been crazy enough to tell him that Tresler's been sparkin' you?"

The girl's smile died out, and her pretty eyes assumed a look of stony contempt as she answered with spirit. And Jake listened to her reply with a smile on his bold face that in nowise concealed his desire to hurt her.

"Whatever happens Mr. Tresler doesn't leave our house until Doc. Osler gives the word. Perhaps it will do you good to further understand that the doctor will not give that word until I choose."

"You're a silly wench!" Jake exclaimed angrily. Then he became scornful. "I don't care that for Tresler, now." Nevertheless he gave a vicious snap with his fingers as he flicked them in the air. "Ha, ha!" he laughed roughly; "I wish him well enough. I have reason to. Let him stay as long as you can keep him. Yes, go right ahead an' dose him, an' physic him; an' when he's well he's goin', sure. An' when he's out of the way maybe you'll see the advantage o' marryin' me. How's that, heh? There, there," he went on tauntingly, as he saw the flushing face before him, and the angry eyes, "don't get huffed, though I don't know but what you're a daisy-lookin' wench when you're huffed. Get right ahead, milady, an' fix the boy up. Guess it's all you'll ever do for him."

Diane had fled before the last words came. She had to, or she would have struck the man. She knew, only too well, how right he was about Tresler; but this cruelty was unbearable, and she went back to the sick-room utterly bereft of the last shadow of the happiness she had left it with.

The doctor came, and brought with him a measure of comfort. He told her there was nothing to be considered now but the patient's weakness, and the cleansing of the wound. In his abrupt manner he suggested a diet, and ordered certain physic, and finally departed, telling her that as her room adjoined her patient's there would be no further need of sitting up at night.

And so three weeks passed ; three weeks of rapid convalescence for Tresler, if they were spent very much otherwise by many of the settlers in the district. Truth to tell, it was the stormiest time that the country had ever known. The check the night-riders had received at Willow Bluff had apparently set them crazy for revenge, which they proceeded to take in a wholly characteristic manner. Hitherto their depredations had been comparatively far apart, considerable intervals elapsing between them, but now four raids occurred one after the other. The police were utterly defied ; cattle were driven off, and their defenders shot down without mercy. These monsters worked their will whithersoever they chose. Reinforcements of police were brought up, but with no other effect than to rouse the discontent of the ranchers at their utter failure. It seemed as though the acts of these rustlers was a challenge to police authority. A reign of terror set in, and settlers, who had been in the country for years, declared their intention of getting out, and seeking a place where, if they had to pay more for their land, they would at least find protection for life and property.

Such was the position when Tresler found himself allowed to move about his room, and sit in a comfortable armchair in the delightful sunlight at his open window. Nor was he kept in ignorance of the doings of the raiders. Diane and he discussed them ardently. But she was careful to keep him in ignorance of everything concerning herself and her father. He knew nothing of the latter's objection to his presence in the house, and he knew nothing of the blind man's threats, or that fearful attack he had perpetrated in one of his fits of mad passion.

These days, so delightful to them both, so brimful of happiness for him, so fraught with such a blending of pain and sweetness for her, had stolen along almost uncounted, unheeded. But like all such overshadowed delights, their end came swiftly, ruthlessly.

The signal was given at the midday meal. The rancher, who had never mentioned Tresler's name since that memorable night, rose from the table to retire to his room. At the door he paused and turned.

"That man, Tresler," he said, in his smooth, even tones. "He's well enough to go to the bunkhouse. See to it."

And he left the girl crushed and helpless. It had come at last. She knew that she could keep her lover no longer at her side. Even Doc. Osler could not help her, and, besides, if she refused to obey, her father would not have the slightest compunction in attending to the matter in his own way.

So it was with a heavy heart she took herself upstairs for the afternoon. This *tête-à-tête* had become their custom every day; she with her sewing, and the sick man luxuriating in a pipe. Tresler was still bandaged, but it was only lightly, for the wound was almost healed.

The girl took up her position as usual, and Tresler moved his chair over beside the little table she laid her work on, and sat facing her. He loved to gaze upon the sad little face. He loved to say things to her that would rouse it from its serious caste, and show him the shadows dispelled, and the pretty smile wreathing itself in their stead. And he had found it so easy, too. The simplicity, the honesty, the single mindedness of this prairie flower made her more than susceptible to girlish happiness, even amidst her troublous surroundings. But he knew that these moments were all too passing, that to make them enduring he must somehow contrive to get her away from that world of brutality, to a place where she could bask, surrounded by love and the sunshine of a happy home. And during the days of his convalescence he planned and plotted for the consummation of his hopes.

But he found her more difficult to-day. The eyes were a shade more sad, and the smile would not come to banish the shadows. The sweet mouth, too, always drooping slightly at the corners, seemed to droop more than usual to-day. He tried, in vain, every topic that he thought would interest her, but at last himself began to experience the depression that seemed to weigh so desperately on her. And strangely enough this dispiriting influence conjured up in his mind a morbid memory, that until then had utterly escaped him. It was the dream he had the night before his awakening. And almost unconsciously he spoke of it.

"You remember the day I woke to find myself here, Danny?" he said. "It just occurs to me now that I wasn't unconscious all the time before. I distinctly remember dreaming. Perhaps I was only asleep."

The girl shook her head.

"You were more than asleep," she said portentously.

"Anyhow, I distinctly remember a dream I had. I should say it was 'nightmare.' It was about your father. He'd got me by the throat, and—what's the matter?"

Diane started, and, to Tresler's alarm, looked like fainting; but she recovered at once.

"Nothing," she said, "only—only I can't bear to think of that time, and then—then—father strangling you! Don't think of your dream. Let's talk of something else."

Tresler's alarm abated at once, he laughed softly and leant forward and kissed her.

"Our future—our little home. Eh, dearest?" he suggested tenderly.

She returned his embrace and made a pitiful attempt to smile back into the eyes which looked so eagerly into hers. And now, for the first time, her lover began to understand that there really was something amiss with her. It was that look, so wistful, so appealing, that roused his apprehension. He pressed her to tell him her trouble, until, for sheer misery, she could keep it from him no longer.

"It's nothing," she faltered, with trembling lips.

Watching her face with a lover's jealousy he kept silence, for he knew that her first words were only her woman's preliminary to something she considered serious.

"Jack," she said presently, settling all her attention upon her work, "you've never asked me anything about myself. Isn't that unusual? Perhaps you are not interested, or perhaps"—her head bent lower over her work—"you, with your generous heart, are ready to take me on trust. However," she went on, before he could interrupt her, "I intend to tell you what you refuse to ask. No," as he leant forward and kissed her again, "now sit up and light your pipe. There are to be no interruptions like that."

She smiled wistfully and gently pushed him back into his chair.

"Now," she began, as he settled himself to listen, "I must go back such a long, long way. Before I was born. Father was a sea captain then. First the captain of a whaler, afterwards he bought a ship of his own and traded round the East Indies. He often used to talk of those days, not because he had any desire to tell me of them, but it seemed to relieve him when he was in a bad temper. I don't know what his trade was, but I think it was of an exciting nature. He often spoke of the risks, which, he said, were amply compensated by the money he made." Tresler smiled gravely. "And father must have made a lot of money at that time, for he married mother, bought himself a fine house and lands just outside Kingston, in Jamaica, and, I believe, he kept a whole army of black servants. Yes, and he has told me, not once, but a hundred times, that he dates all his misfortunes from the day he married my mother, which always seems unfair to her anyway. Somehow I can never think of father as ever having been a kind man, and I've no doubt that poor mother had anything but an easy time of it with him. However, it is not for me to criticize." She paused, but went on almost immediately. "Let me see, it was directly after the honeymoon

that he went away on his last trading trip. He was to call at Java. Jake was his mate, you know, and they were expecting to return in six months' time with a rich harvest of what he calls 'Black Ivory.' I think it was some native manufacture, because he had to call at the native villages. He told me so. But the trip was abandoned after three weeks at sea. Father was stricken down with yellow fever. And from that day to this he has never seen the light of day."

The girl pushed her work aside and went on drearily.

"When he recovered from the fever he was brought home, as he said himself, 'a blind hulk.' Mother nursed him back to health and strength, but she could not restore his sight. I am telling you these things just as I have gleaned them from him at such moments as he chose to be communicative. I imagine, too, from the little things he sometimes let fall when he was angry, that all this time he lived in a state of impotent fury against all the world, against God, but particularly against the one person to whom he should have been most grateful—mother. All his friends deserted him in consequence of his bitter temper—all, that is, except Jake. At last, in desperation, he conceived the idea of going to Europe. At first mother was going with him, but though he was well able to afford the additional expense he begrudged it, and, changing his mind, decided to go alone. He sold his ship, settled his affairs, and went off, and for three years he travelled round Europe, visiting every eye-doctor of note in all the big capitals. But it was all no good, and he returned even more soured than he went away. It was during his absence that I was born."

Again Diane paused. This time it was some moments before she proceeded.

"To add to his troubles," she at last resumed, in a low tone, "mother was seriously ill when he got back, and, the day of his return, died in his presence. After that, whatever his disposition was before, it seems to have become a thousand times worse. And when he is angry now he takes a painful delight in discussing the hatred and abhorrence all the people

of Kingston held him in, and the hatred and abhorrence he returns to mankind in general. By his own accounts he must have been terrible. However, this has nothing to do with our history. Personally, I remember nothing but this ranch, but I understand that he tried to resume his old trade in the Indies. For some reason this failed him; trouble occurred, and he gave it up for good, and came out to this country and settled here. Again, to quote his words, 'away from men and things that drove him distracted.' That," she finished up, "is a brief sketch of our history."

"And just such a story as I should imagine your father had behind him. A most unhappy one," Tresler observed quietly. But he was marvelling at the innocence of this child who failed to realize the meaning of "black ivory."

For a little while there was a silence between them and both sat staring out of window. At last Diane turned, and when she spoke again there was an ominous quivering of the lips.

"Jack," she said, "I have not told you this without a purpose."

"No, I gathered that, dear," he returned. "And this profound purpose?" he questioned, smiling.

Her answer was a long time in coming. What she had to do was so hard.

"Father doesn't like you," she said at last in desperation.

Tresler put his pipe aside.

"It doesn't seem to me he likes anybody very much, unless it's Jake. And I wouldn't bet a pile on the affection between them."

"He likes Jake better than anybody else. At least he trusts him."

"Which is a fair equivalent in his case. But what makes you think he dislikes me more than most people?"

"You remember that night in the kitchen, when you asked me to——"

"Marry? Yes. Could I ever forget it?"

Tresler had taken possession of one of the small hands lying in the girl's lap, but she gently withdrew it.

"I was weeping, and—and you saw the bruises on my arms. Father disapproved of my talking to you——"

"Ah! I understand." And he added, under his breath, "The brute!"

"He says I must give you up."

Tresler was looking straight before him at the window. Now he turned slowly and faced her. His expression conveyed nothing.

"And you?"

"Oh, it is so hard!" Diane burst out, in distress. "And you make it harder. Yes," she went on miserably, "I have to give you up. I must not marry you—dare not——"

"Dare not?"

The question came without the movement of a muscle.

"Yes, he says so. Oh, don't you see? He is blind, and I—I am his only—oh, what am I saying?"

Tresler shook his head.

"I'm afraid you are saying a lot of—nonsense, little woman. And what is more, it is a lot of nonsense I am not going to take seriously. Do I understand that you are going to throw me over simply because he tells you to?"

"Not only because of that."

"Who told him about us?"

"I don't know."

"Never mind. Perhaps I can guess. You have grown tired of me already?"

"You know I haven't, Jack."

Diane put out a hand and gently laid it on one of his. But his remained unresponsive. This sudden awakening from his dream of love had more than startled him. It had left him feeling resentful against somebody or something; at present he was not sure who or what. But he meant to have it out, cost what it might.

"That's all right, then," he said. "Now, tell me this

other reason?" Suddenly he leant forward and looked down into her eyes. His hands, now thin and delicate, held hers tightly in a passionate clasp, and his face was alight with the truth and sincerity of his love. "Remember," he said, "this is no child's play, Danny. I am not the man to give you up easily. I am weak, I know; but I've still got a fight in me, and so long as I am assured of your love, I swear nothing shall part us. I love you as I have never loved anybody in my life—and I just want only you. Now tell me this other reason, dear."

But Diane still hesitated. Her evident distress wrung her lover's heart. He realized now that there was something very serious behind it all. He had never beheld anything so pitiful as the look with which she turned towards him, and further tried to put him off.

"Father says you are to leave this house to-day. Afterwards you will be turned off the ranch. It is only through the police backing the doctor's orders that you were not turned out of here before."

Tresler made no response for a moment. Then he burst out into a hard, mirthless laugh.

"So!" he exclaimed, his laugh dying abruptly. "Listen to me. Your father can turn me out of this house—though I'll save him that trouble—but he can't turn me off this ranch. My residence here is bought and paid for for three years. The agreement is signed and sealed. No, no, let him try another bluff." Then his manner changed to one of gentle persuasion. "But you have not yet come to the real reason, little one. Out with it. It is a bitter plum, I can tell. Something which makes you dread not only its consequences, but—something else. Tell it me, Danny. Whatever it is you may be sure of me. My love for you is unalterable. Believe me, nothing shall come between us."

His voice was infinitely tender, and its effect on Diane was to set two great tears rolling down her cheeks as she listened. He had driven her to a corner, and there was no escape. But

even so she made one more effort to avoid her shameful disclosure.

"Will—will you not take me at my word, Jack?" she asked imploringly.

"Not in this, dearest," he replied.

He spoke inexorably, but with such a world of love in his voice that the long-pent tears came with a rush. He let her weep. He felt it would do her good. And, after awhile when her sobs had ceased, he urged her again.

"Tell me," he whispered.

"I——"

The man waited with wonderful patience.

"Oh, don't—don't make me!" she cried.

"Yes, I must."

And at last her answer came in the faintest of whispers.

"I—I—father is—is only my legal father. He was away three years. I was born three days before he returned."

"Well, well." Tresler sat quite still for a moment while the simple girl sat cowering under the weight of her mother's shame. Then he suddenly reached out and caught her in his arms. "Why, Danny," he cried, pressing her to him, "I never felt so happy over anything in my life as the fact that Julian Marbolt is not your father."

"But the shame of it!" cried the girl, imagining that her lover had not fully understood.

"Shame? Shame?" he cried, holding her still tighter in his arms. "Never let me hear that word on your lips again. You are the truest, sweetest, simplest child in the world. You are mine, Danny. My very own. And I tell you right here that I've won you and will hold you to my last dying day."

Now she was kneeling beside him with her face pillowed on his breast, sobbing in the joy of her relief and happiness. And Tresler kissed her softly, pressing his cheek many times against the silky curls that wreathed about her head. Then, after awhile, he sat looking out of the window with a hard, unyielding stare. Weak as he was, he was ready to do battle with all his might for this child nestling so trustfully in his arms.

CHAPTER XIX

HOT UPON THE TRAIL

THE most welcome thing that had happened to the men on the ranch for many a long day was Tresler's return to the bunkhouse. He was hailed with acclamation. Though he had found it hard to part with Diane under the doubtful circumstances, there was some compensation, certainly gratification, in the whole-hearted welcome of his rough comrades. It was not the effusion they displayed, but the deliberateness of their reception of him, that indexed their true feelings. Teddy Jinks refused to serve out the supper hash until Tresler had all he required. Lew Cawley washed out a plate for him, as a special favour; and Raw Harris, pessimist as he was, and who had a way of displaying the fact in all the little everyday matters of life, cleaned and sharpened a knife for him by prodding it up to the hilt in the hard-beaten earth, and cleaning the prongs of a fork with the edge of his buckskin shirt. But he could not thus outrage his principles without excusing himself, which he did, to the effect that he guessed "invalid fellers need onusual feedin'." Jacob Smith, whose habit it was to take his evening meals seated at the foot of the upright log which served as part of the door casing, and which contact with his broad, buckskin-covered shoulders had polished till it shone resplendently, renounced his coveted position in the invalid's favour. Tresler was a sort of guest of honour, for whom, on this occasion at least, nothing was too good. And in this position Arizona supported him, cursing the flies

that fell into his friend's pannikin of tea, and hooking them out with the point of his hash-besmeared knife as he sat on his log beside him. Joe, too, had come down specially to share the meal, but he, being a member of the household, was very small fry at the bunkhouse.

And Tresler delighted in the kindnesses thus showered on him. The freedom from the sick room did him good; the air was good to breathe, the plain, wholesome food was good; but most of all those bronzed, tough faces around him seemed to put new life and vigour into his enfeebled frame. He realized that it was high time he was at work again.

And there was lots for him to hear. Every man among them had something to add to the general hash of events, and in their usual way proceeded to ladle it out, without regard for audience, contradicting, interrupting, cursing, until the unfortunate man who was the butt of their remarks found himself almost overpowered by the babel.

At length Arizona drew them up with one of his sudden yanks.

"Say," he cried, his eyes glaring fiercely and embracing the whole party with a great, comprehensive roll, "you fellers is like a crowd o' coyotes around a bone. I 'lows Tresler ain't an a'mighty deal better'n a bone about now, but his lugs ain't deef. Y're jest a gorf-darned lot o' onedicated hoboos."

Which attack had the effect of reducing the pandemonium, but in no way suppressing the ardent spirits of the party. It acted as a challenge, which Jacob Smith promptly took up.

"Say, boys," he cried, "we're goin' to git eddication from Arizona!"

His remark was followed by a derisive roar of laughter at the American's expense. But the moment it had subsided the derided one shot out his retort.

"Guess ther's things and critturs down our country we don't never figger to eddicate—them's hogs."

"Fer the reason which they knows more'n you," returned Jacob, in no way worried by the personality.

The boys considered the point achieved by Jacob, and another laugh at Arizona's expense went up. He had stumped the American, who now entered the fight with wonderfully good-natured zest.

"Say," he observed, "I ain't had a heap to do wi' your folks, Jacob, but I'm guessin' ef you're talkin' Gospel, things don't run in your fam'ly."

"Call him a hog right out, Arizona," put in Raw, lazily.

"I ain't callin' Jacob no hog; et 'ud be a nasty trick—on the hog," observed the ready-tongued man.

"Hallo, Jacob!" cried Lew, as the laugh turned on the other man this time.

But Arizona resented the interference, and rounded on him promptly.

"Say, you passon feller, I ain't heerd tell as it's the ways o' your country to butt in an' boost folk on to a scrap. It's gener'ly sed you're mostly ready to do the scrappin'."

"Which means?" Lew grinned in his large way.

"Wal, it mostly means—let's hear from you fust hand."

"It's not much use hearing from me on the subject of hogs. They aren't great on 'em in my country. Eh, Tresler? Besides, you seem quite at home with 'em."

Arizona sprang to his feet, and, walking over to the hulking form of the parson's son, held his hand out.

"Shake," he said, with a grin that drew his parchment-like skin into fierce wrinkles; "we live in the same shack."

Lew laughed with the rest, and when it died down observed—

"Look here, Arizona, when you get talking 'hog' you stand alone. The whole North-West bow to you on that subject. Now go and sit down like a peaceable citizen, and remember that a man who is such a master in the craft of hog raising, who has lived with 'em, bred 'em, fed on 'em, and whose mental vision is bounded by 'em, has no right to down inoffensive, untutored souls like ourselves. It isn't generous."

Arizona stood. He looked at the man; then he glanced at

each face around him and noted the smiles. One hand went up to his long, black hair and he scratched his head, while his wild eyes settled themselves on Tresler's broadly grinning features. Suddenly he walked back to his seat, took up his dish of hash and continued his supper, making a final remark as he eat.

"Langwidge? Gee! I pass."

And during the rest of the meal "hog" found no place. They discussed the topic of the day threadbare. The night-riders filled their thoughts to the exclusion of all else, and Tresler learned the details of their recent exploits, and the opinion of each man on the outrages. Even Teddy Jinks, youthful and only "slushy" as he was, was listened to, so absorbed were these men in their cattle world.

"It's my belief," that reedy youth said, with profound finality, "they're working fer a bust up. I'd gamble one o' Arizona's hogs to a junk o' sow-belly ther' ain't no more of them rustlers around come the fall. Things is hot, an' they're goin' to hit the trail, takin' all they ken get right now."

It was good to be listening to the rough talk of these fellows again. So good that Tresler prolonged this, his first meal with them after such a long absence, to the last possible minute. Then he reluctantly filled his pipe, put away his plate and pannikin, and strolled over to the barn in company with Arizona. He went to inspect his mare; he was fond and justly proud of her. With all her vagaries of temper she was a wonderful beast. Arizona had told him how she had brought both of them into the ranch from Willow Bluff on that memorable night.

"Guess it's a real pity that sergeant feller hadn't got her when he hit Red Mask's trail," observed the American, while he watched Tresler gently pass his hands over each leg in turn. "Clean, eh?" he asked presently.

"Yes. The limbs of a racehorse. Has she been ridden while I've been sick?"

"Nope; she's jest stood guzzlin' oats."

"I shall have a time when I get into the saddle again."

They moved out and stood at the door in full view of the house. The evening was drawing in. The sun was on the horizon, and the purple night shades were rising out over the eastern sky.

"Arizona," Tresler said a little later, "I've got an unpleasant task before me. I've just seen Marbolt pass the window of his den. I want a few words with him. I think I'll go now."

"'Bout the leddy?" inquired the cowpuncher.

"You've struck it."

"Wal, git right along. I'd sooner it wus you than me, I guess. Howsum, I'll set right hyar. Mebbe I'll be handy ef you're wantin' me."

Tresler laughed. "Oh, it's all right," he said. "I'm not dealing with Jake."

"Nope," replied the other, settling himself on a saddle-tree. Then, after a thoughtful pause, "which is regret'ble."

Tresler walked away in the direction of the house. He was weak, and did the journey slowly. Nor did he feel comfortable. However, he was doing what he knew to be right, and, as he ruefully reminded himself, it was seldom pleasant to do one's duty. His object was simply a matter of form, but one which omitted would give Marbolt reason for saying things. Besides, in justice to Danny and himself he must ask her father's consent to their engagement. And as he thought of the uselessness of it he laughed bitterly to himself. Did not the rancher know? And had he not fully explained his views on the matter?

Arizona watched Tresler wobbling unsteadily towards the house and applied many mental epithets of an uncomplimentary nature on his "foolheadedness." Then he was joined by Joe, who had also observed Tresler's visit.

The little man waved a hand in the direction of the retreating figure.

"Wher's he goin'?" he asked.

"Guess it's 'bout the leddy," replied Arizona, shortly.

"An' he wus boosted out 'cause of her," the other said significantly. "Kind o' minds you of one o' them terriers."

"Yup. Or a cow wi' a caf."

"On'y he don't make no fuss. Guess it's a terrier."

And Joe accompanied his final decision with an emphatic nod.

Meanwhile the object of their remarks had made his way to the house and stood before the blind arbiter of his fate in the latter's little office. The rancher was sitting at his table with his face directed towards the window, and his red eyes staring at the glowing sunset. And so he remained, in spite of Tresler's blunt announcement of himself.

"It is necessary for me to see you, Mr. Marbolt," he said.

And he stood waiting for his answer. It came, after some moments, in a tone that offered no encouragement, but was more civil than he expected.

"Since you say so, I suppose it is."

Quite indifferent and certainly undaunted, Tresler proceeded—

"You have already been informed how matters stand between your daughter and myself."

"Yes."

"I am here, then, to formally ask your consent to our engagement."

The red eyes moved from their contemplation of the sunset, and their dead, leech-like stare fixed itself upon the undisturbed face of the would-be son-in-law.

"Tresler," the man said, in a manner that left little to the imagination, "I have only one answer for you. You have become offensive to me on this ranch, and I shall be glad if you will remove yourself as quickly as possible. I shall refund you the money you have paid, and your agreement can be torn up."

"Then you will not consider my proposal?"

"I have already answered you."

Tresler looked hard at the face before him. Mask-like, as it was, it yet conveyed something of the fierce temper behind it. He was glad he saw something of it, for he felt more justified in the heat of his own feelings. The man's words were a studied insult, and he was not one to submit to insults from anybody.

"I emphatically refuse, then, to remove my offensive person," he replied, with a great assumption of calmness. "Furthermore, I will not entertain the return of my premium. I am here for three years' instruction, already paid for. That instruction I demand. You will understand it is not in your power to have my offensive person removed either legally or forcibly. The latter especially, since it would cost you far more than you would find it pleasant to pay."

He expected to witness one of those outbursts of fury such as the blind man had recently displayed towards Jake in his presence. But nothing of the kind happened. His manner remained the same.

"I am sorry," he said, with something almost like a smile. "You drive me to an alternative, which, if less convenient, is perhaps, on the whole, more satisfactory. My daughter will have to go. I was prepared for this, and have already made arrangements for her to visit certain friends this day fortnight, for an indefinite period. You quite understand, Tresler, you will not see her again. She will remain away until you leave here. Of course, in the meantime, should you take it into your head to follow her, you are clear-headed enough to see that your agreement with me would be broken. Then she would return at once, and the question of force to keep you apart would be entirely in my hands. Further, I must tell you that while she is away she will be living in an obscure settlement many miles from here, where all letters addressed to her will be opened before she receives them."

The blind man turned away, indicating that the interview was ended, but Tresler stood his ground, though he fully realized how thoroughly this man had outwitted him.

"At least she will be happier away from here," he said significantly.

"I don't know," retorted the other, with diabolical meaning.

Tresler's exasperation could no longer be restrained. "Your conduct is inhuman to thus persecute a helpless girl, your daughter."

"Ah, my daughter. Yes?"

But the other gave no heed to the sneer. "You have no right to stand between us," he went on angrily. "You have no reasonable grounds. I tell you straight, I will not submit. When your daughter is of age I will take her from this home, which is no home to her, from you who have never been a father to her."

"True," assented the other, with an aggravating calmness.

"You will have no power to interfere then. The law——"

"Enough of this nonsense," the rancher interrupted, with his first sign of impatience. "You'll never marry Diane while I live. Take it from me. Now—get out!"

And somehow, in spite of himself, Tresler found himself outside the house and moving in the direction of the bunk-house at the most rapid pace his weakness permitted. But before he reached his destination Jake intercepted him, and he had little doubt in his mind that the man had seen him go to the house and had waited for his return.

"Wal?" he said, drawling out his inquiry, as though the contemplation of the answer he would receive gave him more than ordinary satisfaction. "Guess blind hulks is a pretty hard man to deal with, eh? You're goin' to quit us?"

Tresler was in no mood for this man's sneers. "No," he said. "On the contrary, I stay till my time's out."

Jake could not conceal his surprise and chagrin. "You ain't quittin'?"

"No." Tresler really enjoyed his discomfiture.

"An' you're goin'——"

"No." A thought suddenly occurred to him. He could hand something on to this man. "Miss Marbolt is going to

be sent away until such time as I leave this ranch. Nearly three years, Jake," he finished up maliciously.

Jake stood thoughtfully contemplating the other's shrunken figure. He displayed no feeling, but Tresler knew he had hit him hard.

"An' she's goin', when?" he asked at last.

"This day fortnight."

"Ah. This day fortnight."

After that Jake eyed his rival as though weighing him up in his mind along with other things; then he said quietly—

"Guess, he'd best have sent her right now." And, with this enigmatical remark, he abruptly went back to his shack.

A week saw Tresler in the saddle again. His recuperative powers were wonderful. And his strength returned in a manner which filled his comrades with astonishment. Fresh air and healthy work served as far better tonics than anything the horse-doctor had given him.

And the week, at least to Tresler, was full of portend. True, the rustlers had been quiet, but the effect of their recent doings was very apparent. The police were now in constant communication with the ranch. Sergeant Fyles visited Julian Marbolt frequently, holding long consultations with him; and a significant fact was that the patrols made the place a calling station. He realized that the long arm of the law was seriously at work, and he wondered in what direction the real object lay, for he quite understood that these open movements, in all probability, cloaked the real suspicions. Both he and Joe were of opinion that the police were acting on some secret information, and they puzzled their heads to fathom the depths of the wily sergeant's motives.

Then happened something that Tresler had been expecting for some time. He had not seen Fyles to speak to since the Willow Bluff incident, and this had caused him some wonder. Therefore, one day while out on a distant pasture, rounding up a small bunch of yearlings, he was in no way surprised to see the farmer-like figure of the officer, in its canvas patrol

uniform, appear over the brow of a rising ground, and canter his raw-boned charger down towards him.

And that meeting was in the nature of an eye-opener to Tresler. He learned something of the machinery that was at work ; of the system of espionage that was going on over the whole district, and the subtle means of its employment. He learned, amongst other things, something of what Jake was doing. How he was in constant touch with a number of half-breeds of the most disreputable type, and that his doings were of the most underground nature. He also learned that his own personal efforts in warning the police before Willow Bluff were more than appreciated, and, finally, that Fyles wanted him to further act in concert with him.

Acceding to the officer's request he was then informed of certain other things for his future guidance. And when the man had gone, disappearing again over the rising ground, in the same ghostly fashion that he had appeared, he looked after him, and, in reviewing all he had heard, marvelled how little he had been told, but what a lot had been suggested, and how devilish smart that farmer-like man, in spite of his recent failures, really was.

And during those days Tresler heard very little from Diane ; which little came from Joe Nelson. Now and again she sent him a grief-stricken note alluding to her departure. She told him, although Joe had done so already, that her father had brought Anton into the house for the express purpose of preventing any communication with him, Tresler, and to generally keep sentry over her. She told him much that made his heart bleed for her, and spend hours at night writing pages of cheering messages to her. There was no help for it. He was powerless to do more than try to console her, and he frequently found himself doubting if the course he had selected was the right one ; if he were not aggravating her position by remaining on the ranch. His reason told him that it was surely best. If she had to go away she would, at least, be free of Jake, and, no matter what condition the people to whom

she was to be sent, no worse associations than the combination of the blind man and his mate could possibly be found for her anywhere.

It was poor sort of consolation with which he bolstered himself, and he spent many miserable hours during those last few days. Once he had said to Joe, "If I could only see her for a few minutes it might be some measure of comfort to us both." But Joe had shaken his grey head. "It ain't no use," he said. "You can't take no chances foolin' wi' Anton around. 'Sides, things might be wuss," he finished up, with a considerable emphasis.

And so Tresler had to be content ; ill at ease, chafing, but quite powerless. In truth the rancher had outwitted him with a vengeance ; moreover, what he had said he soon showed that he meant, for Joe brought him the news, two days before the date fixed for departure, that Diane was making her preparations, and had even begun to pack up.

And all this time Jake was very cheerful. The men on the ranch never remembered an easier time than the foreman was giving them now. He interfered very little with the work, and, except at the morning muster, they hardly saw anything of him. Tresler he never came near. He seemed to have forgotten that he had ever discussed Anton with him. It may have been that that discussion had only been inspired on the impulse of the moment, or it may have been—and Tresler thought this far more likely—he had deeper plans. However, the man, in face of Diane's departure, was unusually cheerful, and the wise old Joe quickly observed the fact.

For Joe to observe anything of interest was the cue for him to inquire further, and thus he set himself to watch Jake. And his watching quickly resulted in Tresler's attention being called to Jake's movements at night. Joe found that night after night Jake left the ranch, always on foot, but he left it for hours at a time. Twice during the last week he did not return until daylight. All this was more than interesting, but nothing developed to satisfy their curiosity until the last day of Diane's

stay on the ranch. Then Jake visited her, and, taking her out of the kitchen, had a long confabulation with her in the open. Joe watched them, but, much to his disgust, had no means of learning the man's object. However, there was only one thing for him to do, and he did it without delay : he hurried down to convey his news to Tresler, who was having supper at the bunkhouse.

Taking him on one side he imparted his tidings hurriedly. And in conclusion spoke with evident alarm.

"Ther's suthin' doin'," he said, in, for him, quite a condition of excitement. "I can't locate it nohow. But, Jake, he's that queer. See, he's jest gone right into his shack. Ther's suthin' doin', sure."

"And didn't you ask her what it was all about?" asked Tresler, catching something of the other's manner.

"Wal, no. That is, I guess, I mentioned it like, but Miss Dianny wus that frustrated an' kind o' angry she jest went right up to her room, an' I thought best to git around hyar."

Tresler was thinking hard ; and while he thought he stood watching the door where they had both seen Jake disappear. It occurred to him to go and seek out Diane for himself. Poor girl, she would surely tell him if there were anything wrong. After all, he had the right to know. Then he thought of Anton.

"Was Anton——?"

He had turned to Joe, but his remark was cut short. Jake's door suddenly opened and the foreman came hurriedly out. Joe caught his companion by the arm, and they both looked after the giant as he strode away towards the barn. And they simultaneously became aware of something unsteady in his gait. Joe was the first to draw attention to it.

"Say, he's bin drinkin'," he whispered, in an awed manner.

Tresler nodded. This was something quite new. Jake, with all his faults, was not usually given to drink. On the contrary, he was a particularly sober man.

Tresler swiftly made up his mind. "I'm going to see what's up, Joe," he said. "Do you see? He's making for Marbolt's stable."

It was almost dusk. The men had settled down to their evening's occupations. Tresler and Joe were standing alone in the shadow of the bunkhouse wall. The lamp was lit within the building, and the glow from the window, which was quite near them, darkened the prospect still further. However, Tresler still could see the foreman, an indistinct shadow in the growing darkness.

Leaving his companion without further remark he hurried after the disappearing man and took up his position near the barn, whence he could both see and hear what might be going forward.

Jake reached the door of the stable and knocked on it in a forceful and peremptory manner.

CHAPTER XX

BY THE LIGHT OF THE LAMP

IMPELLED by curiosity and nervous anticipation Tresler did not long remain in the shelter of the barn. It was too dark to see distinctly all that way off, so he closed up on the object of his watch. He intended to miss nothing of what was happening, so he crept out into the open, quite careless of the chances of being discovered at his undignified occupation.

And all the time he was a prey to unpleasant foreboding ; that unaccountable foreboding so truly prophetic, which refuses to be shaken off. He knew that disaster was in the air as surely as if it had all happened, and there was nothing left for him but to gaze impotently upon the ruin. He had a certain amount of reason for his fears, of course, but that reason was largely speculative, and, had he been asked to state definitely what he anticipated, on whom disaster was to fall, he could not have answered with any real conviction. Something prompted him that Jake was to be the central figure, the prime mover. But beyond that his ideas were vague. The man's very summons at the door was a positive aggravation, and suggested possibilities.

An answer came with the abrupt opening of the stable door, which revealed the lithe figure of the dusky half-breed, framed in a setting of dingy yellow light from the lantern within. He could see the insolent, upward stare of the man's eyes as he looked up into the great man's face ; nor at that moment could he help thinking of all he had heard of " Tough " McCulloch.

And the recollection brought him a further feeling of uneasiness for the man who had thus come to beard him in his own den.

But even while these thoughts passed swiftly through his brain the bullying, hectoring tones of Jake's voice came to him. They were unnecessarily loud, and there was a thickness in them which corroborated the evidence of his uneven gait. Jake had certainly been priming himself with spirit.

"Where was you last night, Anton?" he heard him ask.

"An' wher' should I be, Mr. Jake?" came the half-breed's sullen retort.

"That ain't no answer," the other cried, in a vicious tone.

The half-breed shrugged with apparent indifference, only there was no indifference in the resentful flash of his eyes.

"I not answer to you," he said, in his broken way, throwing as much insolence as he could into his words.

Jake's fury needed no urging, the spirit had wound him up to the proper pitch.

"You black son-of-a —," he cried, "you shall answer to me. For two pins I'd wring your blasted neck, only I'm savin' that fer the rope. I'll tell you wher' you was last night. You wer' out. Out with the horses. D'you hear? And you weren't at the Breed camp neither. I know wher' you was."

"Guess you shoot your mouth off," Anton said, with dangerous calmness. "Bah! I tell you I stay right hyar. I not out. You mad! Voila!"

Suddenly Jake's hand went up as though to strike the man, but the blow did not fall. His arm dropped to his side again; for once caution saved him. Tresler felt that had the blow fallen there might perhaps have been a sudden and desperate end to the scene. As it was he listened to Jake's final words, with every nerve throbbing.

"You lie, you black son-of-a —; you lie!"

And then he saw him swing round on his heel and stride away to the rancher's house, as if he could no longer control himself and sought safety in flight.

For the moment the watcher was so interested in the

half-breed that he lost the significance of the foreman's going. Anton was still standing in the doorway, and the expression of his face was plainly visible in the lamplight. There was a saturnine grin about the lower part of the features, but the black eyes were blazing with a deep fire of hatred. He looked after the departing man until he reached the verandah, then suddenly, as though an inspiration had moved him, he vanished at a run within the stable.

Now Tresler became aware of Jake's object. He had mounted the verandah and was making for the door of the house. And this sight moved him to immediate action. Without a second thought he set off at a run to warn Diane of the visit. Why he wished to warn her he did not know. Perhaps it was the result of premonition, for he knew quite well that it was Jake's custom to wait on his chief at about this time in the evening.

He skirted the house well out of range of the light of its windows, and came to the kitchen just in time to hear the blind man calling to his daughter for a light. And when Diane returned from obeying the order she found him waiting for her. Her first feeling was one of apprehension, then love overcame her fears and she ran to him.

"Jack!" she whispered softly. "You here?"

He folded her in a bear-like embrace, and as she raised her face to him to speak he stopped her with a rain of kisses. The joy of the moment had driven the object of his coming from his head, and they stood heart to heart, lost in their mutual happiness, until Jake's voice, raised in bitter imprecation, reached them from the office. Then Tresler abruptly put her from him.

"I had forgotten, dear," he said, in a whisper. "No, don't close that door." Diane had moved over to the door leading into the dining-room. "Leave it open. It is on that account I am here."

"On what account?" the girl asked, in some perplexity.

"Jake. There's something up, and—hark!"

They stood listening. The foreman's voice was raised again. But now Marbolt's broke in, sharp, incisive. And the words were plainly audible.

"Keep your voice down," he said. "D'you want the girl to hear everything? You were always a blunderer, Jake."

"Blunderer be ——" But he nevertheless lowered his tone, for the listeners could distinguish nothing more.

"He's up to some devil's work," Tresler whispered, after making sure they could hear no more. "Danny," he went on eagerly, "I must slip into the hall and try and hear what's going on. I must be ready to—— Listen! He's cursing again. Wait here. Not a sound; not a word! There's going to be trouble."

And his assertion seemed to have reason enough, for the rancher's sharp tones were now mingling with the harsher note of the other, and both had raised their voices again. Tresler waited for nothing now. He tip-toed to the door and stood listening. Then he crept silently out into the hall and stole along towards the blind man's office. He paused as he drew near the open door, and glanced round for some hiding-place whence he could see within. The hall was unlit, and only the faintest light reached it from the office. There was a long, heavy overcoat hanging on the opposite wall, almost directly in front of the door, and he made for it, crossing the hall in the darker part, and sidling along in the shadow until he reached it. Here he drew it in front of him, so that he only elongated its outline and yet obtained a full view of the room.

Jake was not visible. And Tresler concluded that he was sitting in the chair which he knew to be behind the door. But the blind man was almost directly in front of him. He was seated beside the small window table on which the lamp stood, a safety lamp, especially reserved for his use on account of his blindness. His ruddy eyes were staring in the direction in which Tresler believed Jake to be sitting, and such was the effect of that intent stare that the watching man drew well

within his cover, as though he feared the sightless sockets would penetrate his hiding-place.

But even from this vantage ground he found his purpose thwarted. Jake was talking, but his voice was so low that it only reached him in a thick growl which blurred his words into a hazy murmur. Therefore he fixed his attention on the man facing him, watching, and seeking information from his expression and general attitude.

And what he beheld riveted his attention. Whatever control the blind man had over himself—and Tresler had reason to know what wonderful control he had—his expression was quite unguarded now. There was a devilish cruelty in every line in his hard, unyielding features. His sanguinary eyes were burning with a curiously real live light—probably the reflection of the lamp on the table—and his habitually knit brows were scowling to an extent that the eyes beneath them looked like sparks of living fire. And though he was lounging comfortably back in his chair, without energy, without alertness, and one arm was resting on the table at his side, and his outstretched fingers were indolently drumming out a tattoo on the bare wood, his breath was coming short and fast, in a manner that belied his attitude.

Had Tresler only seen behind the door he would have been startled, even alarmed. The inflamed Jake was oblivious to everything but his own purpose. His mind was set on the object of his talk, to the exclusion of all else. Just then he had not the slightest fear of the blind man. There was nothing of the submission about him now that he had displayed once before in Tresler's presence. It was the spirit he had imbibed that had fortified him for the time. It is probable that Jake, at that moment, had no fear of either man or devil.

And, though Tresler could not distinguish a word, his talk was braggart, domineering, and there was a strong flavour of drink in its composition. But even so, there was a relentless purpose in it, too.

"Ther' ain't no option fer you, Marbolt," Jake was saying.

"You've never given me an option, and I'm not goin' to be such a blazing fool as to give you one. God A'mighty, Marbolt, ther' never was a man treated as I've been by you. We've been together fer donkey's years, I guess. 'Way back in them old days, when we was mates, before you was blind, before you was cranked against 'most everybody, when we scrapped agin them black-backs in the Indies side by side, when we quarrelled an' made friends again, I liked you, Marbolt, an' I worked honest by you. There wa'an't nothin' mean to you, then, 'cept in handin' out dollars. I hadn't no kick comin' those days. I worked fer so much, an' I see I got it. I didn't ask no more, an' I guess I didn't want. That's all right. Then you got blind an' you changed round. That's where the rub come. I was no better than the rest to you. You fergot everything that had gone. You fergot I was a square dealin' man by you, an' since that time I've been dirt under your feet. Phsa ! it ain't no use in talkin' ; you know these things just as well as I do. But you might have given me a show. You might have treated me 'white.' It was to your interest. I'd have stayed by you. I'd have done good by you. An' I'd have been real sorry when you died. But I ain't no use fer that sort o' thing now. What I want I'm goin' to have, an' you've got to give—see ? It ain't a question of 'by-your-leave' now. I say right here I want your gal."

The man paused. But Marbolt remained undisturbed. He still beat an idle tattoo on the table, only his hand had drawn nearer to the lamp, and the steady rapping of his fingers was a shade louder, as though more nervous force were unconsciously finding outlet in the movement.

"So you want my girl," he said, his lips scarcely parting to let the tone of his voice pass.

"Ay," Jake said emphatically, "I want that gal as I took out o' the water once. You remember. You said she'd fell overboard, after I'd hauled her back on to the ship out o' reach o' the sharks. That's what you said—after."

He paused significantly. If he had expected any display

from his hearer he must have been disappointed. The other remained quite still except for those moving fingers tapping their way nearer and nearer the lamp.

"Go on."

"Wal, I've told you how I stand, an' I've told you how you stand," Jake proceeded, with his voice ever so little raised. He felt that the other was too easy. And, in his unimaginative way, he thought he had spoken too gently. "An' I say again I want that gal fer my wife. Time was when you would have been glad to be quit of her, 'bout the time she fell overboard. Being ready to part then, why not now? I'm goin' to get her, or—an' what do I pay in return? You know. You'll go on ranchin' in peace. I'll even stay your foreman if you so want. I'll shut right down on the business we both know of, an' you won't have nothin' to fear. It's a fair an' square deal."

"A fair and square deal; most generous."

Even Jake detected the sarcasm, and his anger rose at once. But he gave no heed to those fingers which had now transferred their attention to the brass body of the lamp.

"I'm waitin' fer your answer," he said sharply.

Tresler now heard his words for the first time.

"Go slow, Jake, go slow," retorted the rancher. "I like to digest the position thoroughly. You put it so well."

The sarcasm had grown more fierce by reason of the restraint the rancher was putting on himself. And this restraint was further evident in the movement of the hand, which had now settled itself upon the body of the lamp, and clutched it nervously.

Jake no longer kept check on himself. And his answer came in a roar.

"You shall take my price, or——"

"Keep calm, you blundering jackass!" the blind man rasped between his clenched teeth.

"No, you don't, Mr. blasted Marbolt!" cried Jake, springing to his feet and moving out to the middle of the room

threateningly. "No, you don't!" he cried again; "I've had enough of that. God's curse on you for a low swine! I'll talk no more; it's 'yes' or 'no.' Remember"—he bent over towards the sitting man and pointed in his face with fierce delight—"I am your master now, an' ef you don't do as I say, by G—! but I'll make you whine for mercy."

And Marbolt's answer came with a crash of brass and smashing of glass, a leap of flame, then darkness, as he hurled the lamp to the floor and extinguished it. It came in silence, but a silence ruffled by the sound of sudden movement. It came, as was only to be expected from a man like him, without warning, like the silent attack of a puma, and with as deadly intent.

Tresler could see nothing, but he knew that death was hovering over that room for some one. Suddenly he heard the table dragged or pushed across the floor, and Jake's voice, harsh with the effort of struggle, reached him.

"You would, would you? Right; it's you or me!"

At that moment the onlooker was about to rush forward. For what purpose he had but the vaguest idea. But even as he took the first step he felt himself seized forcibly by the arm from behind. And Diane's voice whispered in his ear.

"Not you, Jack!" she said eagerly. "Leave it to me; I—I can save him—Jake."

"Jake?"

"Yes."

She was gone, and in an instant returned with the lighted kitchen lamp, which she held aloft as she rushed into the room.

Tresler was taken utterly by surprise. The girl's movements were so sudden, so unexpected, and her words so strange.

There she stood in the middle of the room with the light held above her head like some statue. And all the signs of a deadly struggle were about her. Jake was sheltered behind the window table, and stood blinking in the sudden light, staring

at her in blank astonishment. But the chief figure of interest was the blind man. He was groping about the opposite edge of the table, pitifully helpless, but snarling in impotent and thwarted fury. His right hand was still grasping the hilt of a vicious-looking, two-edged hunting-knife, whose point Tresler saw was dripping blood.

Suddenly he turned fiercely on the girl. For the moment he had been held silent, confounded, but now his voice rang out in an an access of fury.

"You jade!" he cried, and moved as though to attack her.

Tresler was about to leap to her assistance, but at that instant the man's attention was suddenly diverted. Jake saw his chance and made for the door. With a bitter imprecation the blind man lunged at him as he went, fell against the table, and stumbled almost to the ground. Instantly the girl took advantage of his position and followed Jake out, slamming the door behind her and swiftly turning the key as she went.

Diane had shown herself in a new light. Her presence of mind was startling, and the whole thing was enacted so swiftly that Tresler failed to grasp the full meaning of it all. Jake had not seen him. In a blind rush he had made for the hall door and passed out. The only thing that seemed real to Tresler was Diane's safety, and he caught her by the arm to take her to the kitchen. But the girl's readiness would permit of no such waste of time.

"No," she whispered quickly. "Leave me and follow Jake. Joe is in the kitchen and will protect me if need be. Quick!" she went on, stamping her foot in her excitement. "Go! Look to him. There must be no murder done here."

And Tresler was forced, much against his will, to leave her. For the moment Diane had soared to a height of alertness and ready action which was irresistible. Without a word he went, passing out of the front door.

Jake had left the verandah, and, in the moonlight, he could see his vast bulk moving down the hill in the direction of his shack. He followed him swiftly. But he was too late. The

whole thing happened before his very eyes, while he was yet too far off to stay the ruthless act, before his warning shout could serve.

He saw a figure dart out from the rancher's stable. He saw it halt and stand. He saw one arm stretched out, and he realized and shouted to Jake.

The foreman stood, turned, a pistol-shot rang out, and he fell on his face. Tresler ran forward, but before he could reach him two more shots rang out, and a third sent its bullet whistling past his own head.

He ran for the man who had fired them. He knew him now; it was Anton. But, fleet of foot, the half-breed had reached the stable, where a horse stood ready saddled. He saw him vault into the saddle, and he saw him vanish into the adjacent woods. Then, at last, he gave up the chase and ran back to the fallen man.

Kneeling at his side he raised the great leonine head. The man was alive, and he shouted to the men at the bunkhouse for aid. But even as he called Jake spoke.

"It ain't no good," he said, in a hoarse tone. "I'm done. Done up by that lyin' son-of-a —, 'Tough' McCulloch. I might 'a' known. Guess I flicked him sore." He paused as the sound of running feet came from the bunkhouse and Arizona's voice was calling to know Tresler's whereabouts. Then the foreman's great frame gave a shiver. "Quick, Tresler," he said, in a voice that had suddenly grown faint; "ther' ain't much time. Listen! get around Widow Dangle's place—to-night—two—mornin' all——"

There came a rattle of flowing blood in his throat which blurred anything else he had to say. But he had said sufficient. Tresler understood.

When Arizona came up Jake, so long the bully of Mosquito Bend, had passed over the One Way Trail. He died shot in three places, twice in the chest and once in the stomach. Anton, or rather "Tough," McCulloch had done his work with all the consummate skill for which he had once been so

notorious. And, as something of this flashed through Tresler's brain, another thought came with it, prompted by the presence of Arizona, who was now on his knees beside him.

"It's Anton, Arizona," he said. "Jake riled him. He shot him, and has bolted through the wood, back there, mounted on one of Marbolt's horses. He's making for the hills. Quick, here, listen! the others are coming. You know 'Tough' McCulloch?"

"Wal?" There was an ominous ring in Arizona's voice.

"You'd like to find him?"

"Better'n heaven."

"Anton is 'Tough' McCulloch."

"Who told you?"

"Jake, here. I didn't mention it before, because—because——"

"Did you say the hills?"

Arizona had risen to his feet. There was no emotion in his manner. They might have been discussing the most ordinary topic. Now the rest of the men crowded round. And Tresler heard the rancher's voice calling from the verandah to inquire into the meaning of the shots. However, heedless of the others, he replied to the cowpuncher's question.

"Yes," he said.

"Shake. S'long."

The two men gripped and Arizona faded away in the uncertain light, in the direction of the barn.

And the dead Jake was borne by rough but gentle hands into his own shack. And there was not one amongst those "boys" but would have been ready and eager to help him, if help had been possible. Even on the prairie death atones for much that in life is voted intolerable.

CHAPTER XXI

AT WIDOW DANGLEY'S

INSIDE the hut, where Jake had so long been master, the boys were grouped round the bunk on which their old oppressor was laid out; the strong, rough fellows were awed with the magnitude of the outrage. Jake, Jake Harnach, the terror of the ranch, "done up." The thought was amazing. Tresler was quietly stripping clothes from the dead man's upper body to free the wounds for the doctor's and police inspection, and Raw Harris was close beside him. It was while in the midst of this operation that the former came upon another wound. Raw Harris also saw it, and at once drew his attention.

"Guess I heerd four shots," he said. "Say, that feller Anton was a daddy. Four of 'em, an' all found their mark. I 'lows this one's on'y a graze. Might a' bin done wi' a knife, et's so clean. Yes, sirree, he was a daddy, sure."

As no one seemed inclined to contradict the statement that Anton was a "daddy," and as the question of four shots or three was of no vital interest to the onlookers, the matter passed unheeded. Only Tresler found food for reflection. That fourth wound he knew had not been inflicted by the half-breed. He remembered the rancher's knife and its dripping point, and he remembered Jake's cry, "You would, would you!" He needed no other explanation.

While the two men were still bending over their task there was a slight stir at the open door. The silent onlookers

parted, leaving a sort of aisle to the bedside, and Julian Marbolt came shuffling his way through them, heralded by the regular tap, tap, of his guiding stick.

It was with many conflicting emotions that Tresler looked round when he heard the familiar sound. He stared at the man as he might stare at some horrid beast of prey, fascinated even against himself. It would have been hard to say what feeling was uppermost with him at the moment. Astonishment, loathing, expectation, and even some dread, all struggled for place, and the combination held him silent, waiting for what that hateful presence was to bring forth. He could have found it in his heart to denounce him then and there, only it would have served no purpose, and would probably have done much harm. Therefore he contented himself with gazing into the inflamed depths of the man's mysterious eyes with an intentness he had never yet bestowed upon them, and while he looked all the horror of the scene in the office stole over him again and made him shudder.

"Where is he—where is Jake?" the blind man asked, halting accurately at the bedside.

The question was directed at no one in particular, but Tresler took it upon himself to answer.

"Lying on the bed before you," he said coldly.

The man turned on him swiftly. "Ah—Tresler," he said.

Then he bent over the bed, and his hands groped over the dead man's body till they came into contact with the congealing blood round the wound in his stomach.

With a movement of repulsion he drew back sharply. "He's not dead?" he questioned, with a queer eagerness, turning round to those about him.

"Yes, he is dead," replied Tresler, with unintentional solemnity.

"Who—who did it?"

The question came in a tense voice, sharper and more eagerly than the proceeding one.

"Anton," chorused the men, as though finding relief from

their long silence in the announcement. The crime was even secondary to the personality of the culprit with them. Anton's name was uppermost in their minds, and so they spoke it readily.

"Anton? And where is he? Have you got him?"

The rancher had turned about, and addressed himself generally.

"Anton has made off with one of your horses," said Tresler. "I tried to get him, but he had too much start for me. I was on foot."

"Well, why are you all here? Have none of you sense enough to get after him?"

"Arizona is after him, and, until the police come, he is sufficient. He will never leave his trail."

There was no mistaking the significance Tresler conveyed in his last remark. The rancher took him up sharply.

"What do you mean?"

"Arizona has no love for Anton."

"Ah! And Jake. Who found him? Who was there when he died?"

Marbolt's eyes had fixed themselves on Tresler's face. And the latter had no hesitation in suiting his reply to his own purpose.

"I found him—dead; quite dead. His death must have been instantaneous."

"So."

Marbolt turned back to the bed.

The rancher stood over the dead man in silence for some minutes. Then, to Tresler's horror, he broke out into a low-voiced lamentation, the hypocrisy of which made him want to seize him by the throat and choke the words ere they were uttered.

"My poor old Jake!" he said, with infinite pity. "Poor old Jake!" he repeated, addressing the dead man sorrowfully. "I wish now I'd taken your advice about that rascal and got rid of him. And to think that you should be the

man on whom he was to wreak his treachery. I wonder how it came about. It must have been that rough temper of yours. Tresler," he cried, pointing to the still form on the bed, "there lies the truest, the only friend I ever had. That man has stood by me when all others had left me. Yes, we've fought side by side in the Indian days; ay, and further back still. I remember when he would have defended me with his life; poor Jake! I suppose he had his faults, the same as most of us have. Yes, and I wager his temper took him foul of Anton. Poor old Jake! I suppose we shall never know the truth of this." He paused. Then he cried fiercely, "Damn it! Men, every one of you, I'll give a thousand dollars to the one who brings Anton back, dead or alive. Dead from preference, then he won't escape us. A thousand dollars. Now, who?"

But Tresler could stand it no longer. "Don't trouble, Mr. Marbolt," he said icily. "It is no use your offering rewards. The man who has gone after Anton will find him. And you can rest satisfied he'll take nothing from you on that score. You may not know Arizona; I do."

"You are confident," the other retorted, resentful at once.

"I have reason to be," came the decided answer.

Marbolt shook his close-cropped head. His resentment had gone from his manner again. He had few moods which he was unable to control at will. That was how it seemed to Tresler.

"I hope truly it may be as you say. But I must still doubt. However," he went on, in a lighter tone, "in the meantime there is work to be done. The doctor must be summoned. Send some one for doctor and police first thing to-morrow morning, Tresler. It is no use worrying them to-night. The police have their night work to do, and wouldn't thank us for routing them out now. Besides, nothing can be done until daylight! And the doctor is only needed to certify. Poor old Jake!"

He turned away with something very like a sigh. Half-way to the door he paused.

"Tresler, you take charge of things to-night. Have this door locked. And," he added, with redoubled earnestness, "are you sure Arizona will hunt that man down?"

"Perfectly."

Tresler smiled grimly. He fancied he understood the persistence.

There was a moment's silence. Then the stick tapped, and the rancher passed out under the curious gaze of his men. Tresler, too, looked after him. Nor was there any doubt of his feelings now. He knew that his presence in the house during Marbolt's murderous assault on Jake was unsuspected. And Marbolt, villainous hypocrite that he was, was covering his tracks. He loathed the blind villain as he never thought to have loathed anybody. And all through his thoughts there was a cold, hard vein of triumph which was utterly foreign to his nature, but which was quite in keeping with his feelings toward the man with whom he was dealing.

As Julian Marbolt passed out the men kept silence, and even when the distant tapping of his stick had died away. Tresler looked round him at these hardy comrades of his with something like delight in his eyes. Joe was not there, which matter gave him satisfaction. The faithful little fellow was at his post to care for Diane. Now he turned to Harris.

"Raw," he said, "will you ride in for the doctor?"

"He said t'morrer," the man objected.

"I know. But if you'd care to do me a favour you'll ride in and warn the doctor to-night, and then—ride out to widow Dangle's and meet us all there, *cached* in the neighbourhood."

The man stared; every man in that room was instantly agog with interest. Something in Tresler's tone had brought a light to their eyes which he was glad to see.

"What is 't?" asked Jacob, eagerly.

"Ay," protested Raw; "no bluffin'."

"There's no bluffing about me," Tresler said quickly.

"I'm dead in earnest. Here, listen, boys. I want you all to go out quietly, one by one. It's eight miles to widow Dangle's. Arrange to get there by half-past one in the morning—and don't forget your guns. There's a big bluff adjoining the house," he suggested significantly. "I shall be along, and so will the police. I think there'll be a racket, and we may—there, I can tell you no more. I refrained from asking Marbolt's permission; you remember what he said once before. We'll not risk saying anything to him."

"I'm in to the limit," said Raw, with decision.

"Guess we don't want no limit to this racket. We'll jest get right along," said Jacob, quietly.

And after that the men filed out one by one. And when the last had gone, Tresler put the lamp out and locked the door. Then he quietly stole up to the kitchen and peered in at the window. Diane was there, so was Joe, with two guns hanging to his belt. He had little difficulty in drawing their attention. There was no dalliance about his visit this time. He waived aside the eager questions with which the girl assailed him, and merely gave her a quiet warning.

"Stay up all night, dear," he said, "but do not let your father know it."

To Joe he said: "Joe, if you sleep a wink this night I'll never forgive you."

Then he hurried away, satisfied that neither would fail him, and went to the barn. Without a word, almost without a sound, he saddled the Lady Jezebel.

His mare ready, he went and gazed long and earnestly up at the rancher's house. He was speculating in his mind as to the risk he was running. Not the general risk, but the risk of success or failure in his enterprise.

He waited until the last of the lights had gone out, and the house stood out a mere black outline in the moonlight, then he disappeared within the barn again, and presently reappeared leading his fractious mare. A few moments later he rode quietly off. And the manner of his going brought a grim

smile to his lips, for he thought of the ghostly movements of the night-riders as he had witnessed them. His way lay in a different direction to that of his comrades. Instead of taking the trail, as they had done, he skirted the upper corrals and pastures, and plunged into the black pinewoods behind the house.

* * * * *

The widow Dangle's homestead looked much more extensive in the moonlight than it really was. Everything was shown up, endowed with a curious silvery burnish which dazzled the eyes till shadows became magnified into buildings, and the buildings themselves distorted out of all proportion. Hers was simply a comfortable place and quite unpretentious.

The ranch stood in a narrow valley, in the midst of which a small brook gurgled its way on to the Mosquito River, about four miles distant. The valley was one of those sharp cuttings in which the prairie abounds, quite hidden and unmarked from the land above, lying unsuspected until one chances directly upon it. It was much like a furrow of Nature's ploughing, cut out to serve as a drainage for the surrounding plains. It wound its irregular course away east and west, a maze of undergrowth, larger bluff, low red-sand cut-banks and crumbling gravel cliffs, all scattered by a prodigal hand, with a profusion that seemed wanton amidst the surrounding wastes of grassland.

The house stood on the northern slope, surrounded on three sides by a protecting bluff of pinewoods. Then to the right of it came the outbuildings, and last, at least one hundred and fifty yards from the rest, came the corrals, well hidden in the bluff, instead, as is usual, of being overlooked by the house. Certainly widow Dangle was a confiding person.

And so Tresler, comparatively inexperienced as he was, thought, as he surveyed the prospect in the moonlight from the back of his mare. He was accompanied by Sergeant Fyles, and the two men were estimating the chances they were likely to have against possible invaders.

"How goes the time?" asked the officer, after a few moments' silent contemplation of the scene.

"You've half an hour in which to dispose your forces. Ah! there's one of your fellows riding down the opposite bank." Tresler pointed across the valley.

"Yes, and there's another lower down," Fyles observed quietly. "And here's one dropping down to your right. All on time. What of your men?"

"They should be in yonder bluff, backing the corrals."

"How many?"

"Four, including the cook."

"Four, and sixteen of mine—twenty. Our two selves—twenty-two. Good; come on."

The officer led the way to the bluff. The cowboys were all there. They received instructions to hold the position at the corrals; to defend them, or to act as reinforcements if the struggle should take place elsewhere. Then the two leaders passed on down into the valley. It was an awkward descent, steep, and of a loose surface that shelved under their horses' feet. For the moment a cloud had obscured the moon, and Fyles looked up. A south-westerly breeze had sprung up, and there was a watery look about the sky.

"Good," he said again, in his abrupt manner. "There won't be too much moon. Moonlight is not altogether an advantage in a matter of this sort. We must depend chiefly on a surprise. We don't want too many empty saddles."

At the bottom of the valley they found the police gathered together in the shelter of the scattered undergrowth. It was Fyles's whole command. He proceeded at once to divide them up into two parties. One he stationed east of the ranch, split into a sort of skirmishing order, to act under Tresler's charge. The other party he took for his own command, selecting an advantageous position to the west. He had also established a code of signals to be used on the approach of the enemy; these took the form of the cry of the screech-owl. Thus, within a quarter of an hour after their arrival, all was in

readiness for the raiders, and the valley once more returned to its native quiet.

And how quiet and still it all was! The time crept on towards the appointed hour. The moon was still high in the heavens, but its light had grown more and more uncertain. The fleecy clouds had densified to a stormy extent. Now and then the rippling waters of the brook caught and reflected for a moment a passing shaft of light, like a silvery rift in the midst of the valley, but otherwise all was shadow. And in the occasional moonlight every tree and bush and boulder was magnified into some weird, spectral shape, distorting it from plain truth into some grotesque fiction, turning the humblest growth into anything from a grazing steer to a moving vehicle; from a prowling coyote to a log hut. The music of the waking night-world droned on the scented air, emphasizing the calm, the delicious peace. It was like some fairy kingdom swept by strains of undefined music which haunted the ear without monotony, and peopled with shadows which the imagination could mould at its pleasure.

But in the eagerness of the moment all this was lost to the waiting men. To them it was a possible battle-ground, and, as such, they regarded it; with a view to cover, as a strategic position, and were satisfied with it. The cattle, turned loose from the corrals, must pass up or down the valley; similarly, any number of men must approach from one of these two directions, which meant that the ambush could not be avoided.

At last the warning signal came. An owl hooted from somewhere up the valley, the cry rising in weird cadence and dying away lingeringly. And, at the same time, there came the sound of a distant rumble, like the steady drone of machinery at some far-off point. Tresler at once gave up his watch on the east and centred all attention upon the west. One of his own men had answered the owl's cry, and a third screech came from the guard at the corrals.

The rumble grew louder. There were no moving objects

visible yet, but the growing sound was less of a murmur ; it was more detached, and the straining ears distinctly made out the clatter of hoofs, evidently travelling fast down the valley trail. On they came, steadily hammering out their measure with crisp precision. It was a moment of tense excitement for those awaiting the approach. But only a moment, although the sensation lasted longer. The moon suddenly brought the whole thing into reality. Suspense was banished with its revealing light, and each man, steady at his post, gripped his carbine or revolver, ready to pour in a deadly fire the moment the word should be given. A troop of about eighteen horsemen dashed round a bend of the valley and plunged into the ambush.

Instantly Fyles's voice rang out. "Halt, or we fire!" he cried.

The horsemen drew rein at once, but the reply was a pistol-shot in the direction whence his voice had sounded. The defiance was Tresler's signal. He passed the word to his men, and a volley of carbine-fire rang out at once, and confusion in the ranks of the horsemen followed immediately.

Then the battle began in deadly earnest. The police leapt into their saddles, and advanced both in front and in rear of the trapped raiders. And the cowpunchers came racing down from the corrals to hurl themselves into the *mêlée*, whooping and yelling, as only men of their craft can.

The fight waxed furiously, but the odds were in favour of the police. The clouded sky lent neither side much assistance. Now and again the peeping moon looked down upon the scene as though half afraid to show itself, and it was by those fleeting rays that the "riders of the plains" levelled their carbines and poured in their deadly fire. But the raiders were no mean foe. They fought desperately, and were consummate in the use of their weapons. Their confusion of the first moment passed instantly, and they rode straight at Tresler's line of defence with a determination that threatened to overwhelm it and force a passage. But the coming of the

cowpunchers stemmed the tide and hurled them back on Fyles's force in their rear. Several riderless horses escaped in the *mêlée*; nor were they only belonging to the raiders. One of the police had dropped from his saddle right beside Tresler, and there was no telling, in the darkness, how many others had met with a similar fate. Red Mask's gang had been fairly trapped, and both sides meant to fight to a finish.

All this time both Tresler and Fyles were looking out for the leader, the man of all whom they desired to capture. But the darkness, which had favoured the ambushade, now defeated their object. In the mob of struggling humanity it was difficult enough to distinguish friend from foe, let alone to discover any one person. The ranks of the police had closed right in and a desperate hand-to-hand struggle was going on.

Tresler was caught in the midst of the tide, his crazy mare had carried him there whether he would or no; but if she had carried him thus into deadly peril, she was also ready to fight for him. She laid about her royally, swept on, and reared plunging at every obstruction to her progress, her master thus escaping many a shot, if it left him able to do little better than fire at random himself. In this frantic fashion the maddened creature tore her way through the thick of the fight, and her rider was borne clear to the further outskirts. Then she tried to get away with him, but in the nick of time, before her strong teeth had fixed themselves on the bit, he managed to head her once again for the struggling mass.

With furious recklessness she charged forward, and, as bad luck would have it, her wild career brought about the worst thing possible. She cannoned violently into the sergeant's charger, while its rider was in the act of levelling his revolver at the head of a man wearing a red mask. The impact was within an ace of bringing both horses and riders to the ground. The mare was flung on her haunches, while Fyles, cursing bitterly, clung desperately to his saddle to retain his seat. But his aim was lost, and his shot narrowly missed his horse's head; and, before either he or Tresler had recovered himself, the red

masked man had vanished into the darkness, heading for the perilous ascent of the valley side.

Terrified out of her life the Lady Jezebel turned, swinging round on her haunches, and charged down the valley ; and as she went Tresler had the questionable satisfaction of seeing the sergeant detach himself from the mob and gallop in pursuit of the raider.

His own blood was up now, and though the mare had got the bit in her teeth he fought her with a fury equal to her own. He knew she was mistress of the situation, but he simply would not give in. He would kill her rather than she should get away with him this time. And so, as nothing else had any effect on her, he snatched a pistol from its holster and leant over and pounded the side of her head with the butt of it in a wild attempt to turn her. At first she gave not the smallest heed to his blows ; such was her madness. But presently she flinched under them and turned her head away, and her body responded to the movement. In another moment he had her round, and as she faced the side of the valley where the raider had disappeared, he slashed her cruelly with his spurs. In a moment the noise of the battle was left behind him, and the mare, with cat-like leaps, was breasting the ascent.

And Tresler only thought of the man he was in pursuit of. His own neck or the neck of his mare mattered nothing to him then. Through him, or through the mare, they had lost Red Mask. He must rectify the fault. He had no idea how. His brain was capable of only one thought—pursuit ; and he thanked his stars for the surefooted beast under him. Nothing stopped her ; she lifted to every obstruction. A cut-bank had no terrors for her, she simply charged it with her great, strong hoofs till the gravel and sand poured away under them and left her a foothold. Bushes were trampled down or plunged through. Blindly she raced for the top, at an angle that made her rider cling to the horn of his saddle to keep himself from sliding off over the cantle.

They passed Fyles struggling laboriously to reach the top.

The Lady Jezebel seemed to shoot past him and leave him standing. And as he went Tresler called out—

“How much start has he?”

“He’s topping it now,” the sergeant replied.

And the answer fired Tresler’s excitement so that he again rammed both spurs into the mare’s flanks. The top of the hill loomed up against the sky. A thick fringe of bush confronted them. Head down, nose almost touching the ground, the mad animal plunged into it. Her rider barely had time to lie down in his saddle and cling to her neck. His thoughts were in a sort of mental whirlpool and he hardly realized what had happened, when, the next moment, the frenzied demon under him plunged out on to the open prairie.

She made no pause or hesitation, but like a shot from a gun swept on straight as the crow flies, her nose alone guiding her. She still held the bit in her jaws; her frolic had only just begun. Tresler looked ahead and scanned the sky line, but the darkness obscured all signs of his quarry.

He had just made up his mind to trust to chance and the captious mood of his mare when the moon, crossing a rift in the clouds, gave him a sort of flashlight view of the horizon. It only lasted a few seconds, but it lasted long enough for him to detect a horseman heading for the Mosquito River, away to the right, with a start that looked like something over a mile. His heart sank at the prospect. But the next instant hope bounded within him, for the mare swung round of her own accord and stretched herself for the race.

He understood. She had recognized the possibility of company; and few horses, whatever their temper, can resist that.

He leaned over and patted her shoulder, easing her of his weight like a jockey.

“Now, you she-devil,” he murmured affectionately, “behave yourself for once, and go—go like the fiend you are!”

CHAPTER XXII

THE PURSUIT OF RED MASK

A MILE start; it would seem an impossible advantage. Even with a far better horse in pursuit, how many miles must be covered before that distance could be made up? Could the lost ground be regained in eight miles? It looked to be out of the question even to Tresler, hopeful of his mare as he was, and knowing her remarkable turn of speed. Yet such proved to be the case. Eight miles saw him so close on the heels of the raider that there was nothing left for the fugitive but to keep on.

He felt no surprise that they were traversing the river trail. He even thought he knew how he could head his man off by a short cut. But this would not serve his purpose. He wanted to get him red-handed, and to leave him now would be to give him a chance that he was confident would be taken advantage of at once. The river trail led to the ranch. And the only branches anywhere along its route were those running north and south at the ford.

Steadily he closed up, foot by foot, yard by yard. Sometimes he saw his quarry, sometimes he was only guided by the beat of the speeding hoofs. Now that he was urging her, the Lady Jezebel had relinquished the bit, not only willing, but bursting to do better than her best. No rider could resist such an appeal. And as they went Tresler found himself talking to her with an affection that would have sounded ridiculous to any but a horseman. It made him smile to see

her ears laid back, not in the manner of a horse putting forth its last efforts, but with that vicious air she always had, as though she were running open-mouthed at Jacob Smith, as he had seen her do in the corral on his introduction to her.

When they came to the river ford he was a bare hundred yards in the wake of his man. Here the road turned off for the ranch, and the trees met overhead and shut out the light of the moon. It was pitch black, and he was only guided by the sound of the other horse in front. Abreast of the ford he became aware that this sound had abruptly died out, and at the bend of the trail he pulled up and listened acutely. They stood thus, the mare's great body heaving under him, until her rider caught the faint sound of breaking bush somewhere directly ahead of them.

Instantly recollection came to his help, and he laughed as he turned the mare off the trail and plunged into the scrub. It was the spot where, once before, he had taken, unwillingly, to the bush. There was no hesitation, no uncertainty. They raced through the tangle, and threaded their way on to the disused trail they had both travelled before.

The fugitive had gained considerably now, and Tresler, for the first time since the race had begun, asked his mare for more pace. She simply shook her head, snorted, and swished her tail, as though protesting that the blow was unnecessary. She could not do the impossible, and that he was asking of her. But his forcible request was the nervous result of his knowledge that the last lap of the race had been entered upon and the home stretch was not far off. It must be now or never.

He soon realized that the remaining distance was all too short. As he came to the place where the forest abruptly terminated, he saw that day had broken. The grey light showed him to be still thirty yards or so behind.

They had reached the broken lands he remembered so well. Before him stretched the plateau leading to the convergence of the river and the cliff. It was the sight of this

which gave him an inspiration. He remembered the branching trail to the bridge, also the wide sweep it took, as compared with the way he had first come. To leap the river would gain him fifty yards. But in that light it was a risk—a grave risk. He hesitated. Annoyed at his own indecision, he determined to risk everything on one throw. The other horse was distinctly lagging. He reached down and patted his mare's neck. And that simple action restored his confidence; he felt that she was still on top of her work. The river would have no terrors for her.

He saw the masked man turn off for the bridge, but he held straight on. He gave another anxious look at the sky. The dull grey was still unbroken by any flush of sunrise, but it was lighter, certainly. The mask of clouds was breaking, though it still contrived to keep daylight in abeyance. He had no option but to settle himself in the saddle for the great effort. Light or no light, he could not turn back now.

And for the while he forgot the fugitive. His mind centred on the river ahead, and the moment when his hand must lend the mare that aid, without which he could not hope, after her great journey, to win the far bank. His nerve was steady, and his eyes never more alert. Everything was distinct enough about him. The bushes flying by were clearly outlined now, and he fancied he could already see the river's line of demarkation. On they raced, he leaning well forward, she with her ears pricked, attentive to the murmurs of the water already so near. Unconsciously his knees gripped the leggaderos of his saddle with all the power he could put into the pressure, and his body was bent crouching, as though he were about to make the spring himself.

And the moment came. He spurred and lifted; and the game beast shot forward like a rocket. A moment, and she landed. But the half lights must have deceived her. She had jumped further than before, and, crashing into a boulder with her two fore feet, she turned a complete somersault, and

fell headlong to the ground, hurling her rider yards out of the saddle into the soft loose sand of the trail beyond.

Quite unhurt, Tresler was on his feet in an instant. But the mare lay still where she had fallen. A hopeless feeling of regret swept over the man as he turned and beheld her. He saw the masked raider dash at the hillside on his weary horse, not twenty yards from him, but he gave him no heed.

It needed no look into the mare's glazing eyes to tell him what he had done. He had killed her. The first really honest act of her life had led to the unfortunate creature's own undoing. Her lean ewe neck was broken, as were both her fore-legs.

The moment he had ascertained the truth he left her, and, looking up at the hill, saw that it was high time. The rider had vanished, but his jaded horse was standing halfway up the hillside in the mire of loose sand. It was either too frightened or too weary to move, and stood there knee-deep, a picture of dejection.

The task of mounting to the ledge was no light one, but Tresler faced it without a second thought. The other only had something less than a minute's start of him, and as there was only one other exit to the place—and that, he remembered, of a very unpromising nature—he had few fears of the man's ultimate escape. No, there was no escape for him; and besides—a smile lit up the hard set of his features at the thought—daylight had really come. The clouds had at last given way before the rosy herald of sunrise.

The last of the ascent was accomplished, and, breathing hard, Tresler stepped on to the gravel-strewn plateau, gun in hand. He felt glad of his five-chambered companion. Those rough friends of his on the ranch were right. There was nothing so compelling, nothing so arbitrary, nor so reassuring to the possessor and confounding to his enemies, as a gun well handled.

The ledge was empty. He looked at the towering cliff, but there was no sign of his man in that direction. He moved

towards the hut, but at the first step the door of the dugout was flung wide, and Julian Marbolt, gun in hand, dashed out.

He came with a rush, without hesitation, confidently ; but as the door was thrown open, and the flood of daylight shone down upon him, he fell back with a bitter cry of despair, and Tresler knew that he had not reckoned on the change from comparative darkness to daylight. He needed no further proof of what he had come to suspect. The rancher was only blind in the presence of strong light !

For a second only he stood cowering back, then, feeling his way, he darted with miraculous rapidity round the side of the building, and scrambled towards the dizzy staircase in the rock.

Tresler challenged him at once, but he paid no heed. He had reached the foot of the stairway, and was climbing for life and liberty. The other knew that he ought to have opened fire on him, but the old desire to trust to his hands and bodily strength overcame his better judgment, and he ran at him. His impulse was humane but futile, for the man was ascending with marvellous rapidity, and by the time he had reached the foot of the ladder, was beyond his reach.

There was nothing left now but to use his gun or to follow. One look at the terrific ascent, however, left him no choice.

"Go on, and I'll drop you, Julian Marbolt !" he shouted. "I've five chambers loaded in each gun."

For response, the blind man increased his exertions. On he went, up, up, till it made the man below dizzy to watch him. Tresler raised his gun and fired wide, letting the bullet strike the rock close to the man's right hand to convince him of his intentions. He saw the limestone splinter as the bullet hit it, while the clutching, groping hand slid higher for a fresh hold ; but it had no other effect.

He was at a loss. If the man reached the top, he knew that somewhere over the brink lay a road to safety. And he was nearing it ; nearing it foot by foot with his crawling,

clinging clutch upon the face of rock. He shuddered as he watched, fascinated even against himself. Deprived of sight, the man's whole body seemed alert with an instinct that served him in its stead. His movements were like those of some cuttlefish, reaching out blindly with its long feelers and drawing itself up by the power of its tentacles.

He shouted a last warning. "Your last chance!" he cried; and now his aim was true, and his purpose inflexible.

The only answer was a hurried movement on the part of the climbing man.

Tresler's finger was on the trigger, while his eyes were fixed on his mark. But the hammer did not fall; the final compression of the hand was stayed, while horror leapt into the eyes so keenly looking over the sight. Something had happened up there on the face of the cliff. The man had slipped! One foot shot out helplessly, as the frantic climber struggled for those last few steps before the shot came. He wildly sought to recover himself, but the fatal jolt carried the weight of his body with it, and wrenched the other foot from its hold. For the fraction of a second the man below became aware of the clinging hands, as they desperately held to the rock, and then he dropped his gun and clapped his hands over his ears as a piercing shriek rang out. He could not witness any more. He only heard, in spite of his stopped ears, the lumping of a soft body falling; he saw, though his eyes were closed almost on the instant, a huddled figure pitch dully upon the edge of the plateau and disappear below. It all passed in a flash.

Then silence reigned. And when he opened his eyes there was no horrible sight, nothing seemed to have been disturbed. It had gone; no trace was left, not a tatter of cloth, not a spot of blood, nothing.

He knew. His imaginary vision of the old-time trapper had been enacted before his very eyes. All that remained of Julian Marbolt was lying—down there.

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Sergeant Fyles and Tresler were standing in the valley below. They were gazing on the mangled remains of the rancher. Fyles had removed the piece of red blanket from the dead man's face, and held it up for inspection.

"Um!" he grunted. "The game's played out."

"There's more of that up there in the hut," said Tresler.

"Breed blanket," commented Fyles, folding it up and carefully bestowing it in his pocket. Then he turned and gazed down the yawning valley. It was a wonderful place, a mighty rift extending for miles into the heart of the mountains. "A nice game, too," he went on presently. "Ever seen this place before?"

"Once," Tresler replied. Then he told the officer of his runaway ride.

Fyles listened with interest. At the conclusion, he said, "Pity you didn't tell me of this before. However, you missed the chief interest. Look away down there in the shelter of the cliff. See—about a mile down. Corrals enough to shepherd ten thousand head. And they are cunningly disposed."

Tresler now became aware of a scattered array of corrals, stretching away out into the distance, but so arranged at the foot of the towering walls of the valley that they needed looking for closely.

Then he looked up at the ledge which had been the scene of the disaster, and the ladder of hewn steps above, and he pointed at them.

"I wonder what's on the other side?"

"That's an easy one," replied his companion promptly. "Half-breeds."

"A settlement?"

"That's about it. You remember the Breeds cleared away from their old settlement lately. We've never found them. Once they take to the hills, it's like a needle in a haystack. Maybe friend Anton is in hiding there."

"I doubt it. 'Tough' McCulloch didn't belong to them,

as I told you. He comes from over the border. No; he's getting away as fast as his horse can carry him. And Arizona isn't far off his trail, if I'm any judge."

Fyles's great round face was turned contemplatively on his companion.

"Well, that's for the future, anyhow," he observed, and moved to a bush some yards away. "Let's have an easy. Corporal Money has gone in for a patrol waggon. I don't expect him for a couple of hours or so. We must keep it company," he added, nodding his head in the direction of the dead man.

They sat down and silently lit their pipes. Fyles was the first to speak.

"Guess I've got to thank you," he said, as though that sort of thing was quite out of his province.

Tresler shook his head. "Not me," he said. "Thank my poor mare." Then he added, with a bitter laugh, "Why, but for the accident of his fall, I'm not sure he wouldn't have escaped. I'm pretty weak-kneed when it comes to dropping a man in cold blood."

The other shook his head.

"No; he wouldn't have escaped. You underestimate yourself. But even if you had missed I had him covered with my carbine. I was watching the whole thing down here. You see, Money and I came on behind. I don't suppose we were more than a few minutes after you. That mare you were riding was a dandy. I see she's done."

"Yes," Tresler said sorrowfully. "And I'm not ashamed to say it's hit me hard. She did us a good turn."

"And she owed it to us."

"You mean when she upset everything during the fight?"

"Yes."

"Well, she's more than made amends. In spite of her temper, that mare of mine was the finest thing on the ranch."

"Yours?" Fyles raised his eyebrows.

"Well—Marbolt's."

But the officer shook his head. "Nor Marbolt's. She belonged to the police. And, incidentally, was once my trooper in Calford. She was turned out to graze with a bunch of others, as an incorrigible rogue and vagabond. The whole lot were stolen and one of the guard shot. Her name was 'Strike 'em.'"

"Strike 'em?"

"Yes. Ever have her come at you with both front feet, and her mouth open?"

Tresler nodded.

"That's it. 'Strike 'em.' Fine mare—half blood."

"But Marbolt told Jake he bought her from a half-breed outfit."

"Dare say he did."

Fyles re-lit his pipe for about the twentieth time, which caused Tresler to hand him his pouch.

"Try tobacco," he said, with a smile.

The officer accepted the invitation with unruffled composure. The gentle sarcasm passed quite unheeded. Probably the man was too intent on the business of the moment, for he went on as though no interruption had occurred.

"After seeing you on that mare I found the ranch interesting. But the man's blindness fooled me right along. I had no trouble in ascertaining that Jake had nothing to do with things. Also I was assured that none of the 'hands' were playing the game. Anton was the man for me. But soon I discovered that he was not the actual leader. So far, good. There was only Marbolt left; but he was blind. Last night, when you came for me, and told me what had happened at the ranch, and about the lighted lamp, I tumbled. But even so I still failed to understand all. The man was blind in daylight, and could see in darkness or half-light. Now, what the deuce sort of blind disease is that? And he seems to have kept the secret, acting the blind man at all times. It was clever—devilish clever."

Tresler nodded. "Yes; he fooled us all, even his daughter."

The other shot a quick glance from out of the corners of his eyes.

"I suppose so," he observed, and waited.

They smoked in silence.

"What are you going to do next?" asked Tresler, as the other showed no disposition to speak.

The man shrugged. "Take possession of the ranch. Just keep the hands to run it. The lady had better go into Forks if she has any friends there. You might see to that. I understand that you are—gossip, you know."

"Yes."

"There'll be inquiries and formalities. The property I don't know about. That will be settled by the Government."

Tresler became thoughtful. Suddenly he turned to his companion.

"Sergeant," he said earnestly, "I hope you'll spare Miss Marbolt all you can. She has lived a terribly unhappy life with him. I can assure you she has known nothing of this—nothing of his strange blindness. I would swear it with my last breath."

"I don't doubt you, my boy," the other said heartily. "We owe you too much to doubt you. She shall not be bothered more than can be helped. But she had some knowledge of that blindness, or she would not have acted as she did with that lamp. I tell you candidly she will have to make a statement."

"Have no doubt; she will explain."

"Sure—ah! I think I hear the wheels of the patrol waggon." Fyles looked round. Then he settled himself down again. "Jake," he went on, "was smartest of us all. I can't believe he was ever told of his patron's curious blindness. He must have discovered it. He was playing a big game. And all for a woman! Well, well."

"No doubt he thought she was worth it," said Tresler, with some asperity.

The officer smiled at the tone. "No doubt, no doubt.

Still, he wasn't young. He fooled you when he concurred with your suspicions of Anton—that is, he knew you were off the true scent, and meant keeping you off it. I can understand, too, why you were sent to Willow Bluff. You knew too much, you were too inquiring. Besides, from your own showing to Jake—which he carried on to the blind man for his own ends—you wanted too much. You had to be got rid of, as others had been got rid of before. Yes, it was all very clever. And he never spared his own stock. Ha! ha!—robbed himself by transferring a bunch of steers to these corrals, and, later on, I suppose, letting them drift back to his own pastures. I only wonder why, with a ranch like his, he ran the risk.”

“Perhaps it was old-time associations. He was a slave-trader once, and no doubt he stocked his ranch originally by raiding the Indians' cattle. Then, when white people came around, and the Indians disappeared, he continued his depredations on less open lines.”

“Ah! slave-trader, was he? Who said?”

“Miss Marbolt innocently told me he once traded in the Indies in ‘black ivory.’ She did not understand.”

“Just so—ah, here is the waggon.”

Fyles rose leisurely to his feet. And Corporal Money drove up.

“The best of news, sergeant,” the latter cried at once. “Captured the lot. Some of the boys are badly damaged, but we've got 'em all.”

“Well, we'll get back with this,” the officer replied quietly.

The dead man was lifted into the waggon, and, in a few minutes, the little party was on its way back to the ranch.

CHAPTER XXIII

A RETURN TO THE LAND OF THE PHILISTINES

THE affairs of the ranch were taken in hand by Sergeant Fyles. Everything was temporarily under his control, and an admirable administrator he proved. Nor could Tresler help thinking how much better he seemed suited by such pastoral surroundings than by the military atmosphere of his proper calling. But this appointment only lasted a week. Then the authorities drafted a man to relieve him for the more urgent business of the investigation into the death of the rancher and his foreman, and the trial of the half-breed raiders captured at widow Dangle's valley.

Diane, acting on Tresler's advice, had taken up her abode with Mrs. Doc. Osler in Forks, which good, comfortable, kind, gossipy old woman insisted on treating her as a bereaved and ailing child, who must be comforted and ministered to, and incidentally dosed with tonics. As a matter of fact, Diane, though greatly shocked at the manner and conditions of her father's death, and the discovery that he was so terrible an outlaw, was suffering in no sense the bereavement of the death of a parent. She was heartily glad to get away from her old home, that had held so much unhappiness and misery for her. Later on, when Tresler sent her word that it was imperative for him to go into Calford with Sergeant Fyles, that he had been summoned there as a witness, she was still more glad that she had left it. Thanks to the influence and consideration of Fyles, she had been spared the ordeal of the trial in

Calford. She had given her sworn testimony at the preliminary inquiry on the ranch, and this had been put in as evidence at the higher court.

And so it was nearly a month before Tresler was free to return to Forks. And during that time he had been kept very busy. What with police affairs, and matters of his own concerns, he had no time for anything but brief and infrequent little notes of loving encouragement to the waiting girl. But these messages tended otherwise than might have been expected. The sadness that had so long been almost second nature to the girl steadily deepened, and Mrs. Osler, ever kind and watchful of her charge, noticed the depression settling on her, and with motherly solicitude—she had no children of her own—insisted on the only remedy she understood—physic. And the girl submitted to the kindly treatment, knowing well enough that there was no physic to help her complaint. She knew that, in spite of his tender messages and assurances of affection, Tresler could never be anything more in her life than he was at present. Even in death her father had carried out his threat. She could never marry. It would be a cruel outrage on any man. She told herself that no self-respecting man would ever marry a girl with such a past, such parentage.

And so she waited for her lover's return to tell him. Once she thought of writing it, but she knew Jack too well. He would only come down to Forks post haste, and that might upset his plans; and she had no desire to cause him further trouble. She would tell him her decision when he had leisure to come to her. Then she would wait for the Government orders about the ranch, and, if she were allowed to keep it, she would sell the land as soon as possible and leave the country for ever. She felt that this course was the right one to pursue; but it was very, very hard, and no measure of tonics could dispel the deepening shadows which the cruelty of her lot had brought to her young face.

It was wonderful the kindness and sympathy extended to her in that rough settlement. There was not a man or woman,

especially the men, who did not do all in his or her power to make her forget her troubles. No one ever alluded to Mosquito Bend in her presence, and, instead, assumed a rough, cheerful jocularity, which sat as awkwardly on the majority as it well could. For most of them were illiterate, hard-living folk, rendered desperately serious in the struggle for existence in a place that was only kept alive by an illicit traffic, which, since the arrival of the police, had become almost impossible. Forks was reduced to a state of reckless poverty now, and every man in the place was looking out for fresh fields which offered no such restraining influence as Sergeant Fyles and his men.

And back to this place Tresler came one day. He was a very different man now to what he had been on his first visit. He looked about him as he crossed the market place. Quickly locating Doc. Osler's little house, he smiled to himself as he thought of the girl waiting for him there. But he kept to his course and rode straight on to Carney's saloon. Here, as before, he dismounted. But he needed no help or guide. He straightway hooked his horse's reins over the tie-post and walked into the bar.

The first man to greet him was his old acquaintance Slum Ranks. The little man looked up at him in a speculative manner, slanting his eyes at him in the way he remembered so well. There was no change in the rascal's appearance. In fact, he was wearing the same clothes Tresler had first seen him in. They were no cleaner and no dirtier. The man seemed to have utterly stagnated since their first meeting, just as everything else in the saloon seemed to have stagnated. There were the same men there—one or two more besides—the same reeking atmosphere, the same dingy hue over the whole interior. Nothing seemed changed, in spite of the changes Fyles had wrought in the settlement.

Slum's greeting was characteristic. "Wal, blind-hulks has passed—eh? I figgered you was comin' out on top. Guess the Government 'll treat you han'some."

The butcher guffawed from his place at the bar. Tresler saw that he was still standing with his back to it; his hands were still gripping the moulded edge, as though he had never changed his position since the first time he had seen him. Shaky, the carpenter, looked up from the little side table at which he was playing "solitaire" with a greasy pack of cards; his face still wore the puzzled look with which he had been contemplating the maze of spots and pictures a moment before. Those others who were new to him turned on him curiously as they heard Slum's greeting, and Carney paused in the act of wiping a glass, an occupation which never failed him, however bad trade might be.

Tresler felt that something was due to those who could display so much interest in his return, so he walked to the bar and called for drinks. Then he turned to Slum.

"Well," he said, "I'm going to take up my abode here for a week or two."

"I'm real glad," said Ranks, his little eyes lighting up at the prospect. He remembered how profitable this man had proved before. "The missis 'll be glad, too," he added. "I 'lows she's a far seein' wummin. We kep' a best room fer sech folk as you, now. A bran' noo iron bed, wi' green an' red stripes' an' a wash-bowl goin' with it. Say, it's a real dandy lay-out, an' on'y three dollars a week wi'out board. Guess I'll git right over an' tell her to fix—eh?"

Tresler protested and laid a detaining hand on his arm. "Don't bother. Carney, here, is going to fix me up; aren't you, Carney?"

"That's how," replied the saloon-keeper, with a triumphant grin at the plausible Slum.

"Wal, now. You plumb rattle me. To think o' your goin' over from a pal like that," said Slum, protestingly, while the butcher guffawed and stretched his arms further along the bar.

"Guess he's had some," observed the carpenter, shuffling his cards anew. "I 'lows that bed has bugs, an' the

wash-bowl's mostly used dippin' out swill," he finished up scornfully.

Ranks eyed the sad-faced man with an unfriendly look. "Guess I never knew you but what you was insultin', Shaky," he observed, in a tone of pity. "Some folks is like that. Guess you git figgerin' them cards too close. You never was bustin' wi' brains. Say, Carney," turning back to the bar complainingly, "wher's them durned brandy 'cocks' Mr. Tresler ordered awhile back? You're gettin' most like a fun'ral on an up-hill trail. Slow—eh? Guess if we're to be pizened I sez do it quick."

"Comin' along, Slum," replied Carney, winking knowingly to let Tresler understand that the man's impatience was only a covering for his discomfiture at Shaky's hands. "I've done my best to pizen you this ten year. Guess Shaky's still pinin' fer the job o' nailin' a few planks around you. Here you are. More comin'."

"Who's needin' me?" asked Shaky, looking up from his cards. "Slum Ranks?" he questioned, pausing. "Guess I've got a plank or two fit fer him. Red pine. Burns better."

He lit his pipe with great display and sucked at it noisily. Slum lowered his cocktail and turned a disgusted look on him.

"Say, go easy wi' that lucifer. Don't breathe on it, or ther' won't be no need fer red pine fer you."

"Gentlemen, gentlemen," cried Carney, jocosely, "the present—kep to the present. Because Slum, here, runs a—well, a boardin' establishment ther' ain't no need to discuss his future so coarsely."

"Not so much slack, Carney," said Slum, a little angrily. "Guess my boardin' emporium 's rilin' you some. You're feelin' a hur'cane; that's wot you're feelin', I guess. Makes you sick to see folks gittin' value fer their dollars, don't it?"

"Good fer you, good fer you," cried the butcher, and subsided into a loud guffaw.

The unusual burst of speech from this man caused general

surprise. The entire company paused to stare at the shining, grinning face.

"Sail in, Slum," said a lean man Tresler had heard addressed as 'Sawny' Martin. "I allus sez as you've got a dead eye fer the tack-head ev'ry time. But go easy, or the boss 'll bar you on the slate."

"Don't owe him nuthin'," growled Slum.

"Which ain't or'nary in this company," observed the smiling Carney; he loved to get Slum angry. "Say, Shaky," he went on, "how do Slum fix you in his—hotel? You don't seem bustin' wi' vittals."

"Might do wuss," responded the carpenter, sorrowfully. "But, y' see, I stan' in wi' Doc. Osler, an' he physics me reg'lar."

Everybody laughed with the butcher this time.

"Say, you gort-durned 'fun'ral boards,' you're gittin' kind o' fresh, but I'd bet a greenback to a last year's cornshuck you don't quit ther' an' come grazin' around Carney's pastures, long as my missis does the cookin'."

"I 'lows your missis ken cook," said Shaky, with enthusiasm. "The feller as sez she can't, lies. But wi' her, my respec' fer your hog-pen ends. I guess this argyment is closed fer va-cation. Who's fer 'draw'?"

Slum turned back to the bar. "Here, Carney," he said, planking out a ten-dollar bill, "hand over chips to that. We're losin' blessed hours gassin'. I'm goin' fer a hand at 'draw.' An' say, give us a new deck o' cards. Guess them o' Shaky's needs curry-combin' some. Mr. Tresler," he went on, turning to his old boarder, "mebbe I owe you some. Have you a notion?"

"No thanks, Slum," replied Tresler, decidedly. "I'm getting an old hand now."

"Ah!"

And the little man moved off with a thoughtful smile on his rutted, mahogany features.

Tresler watched these men take their seats for the game.

Their recent bickering was wholly forgotten in the ruling passion for "draw." And what a game it was! Each man, ignorant, uncultured in all else, was a past master at poker—an artist. The baser instincts of the game appealed to the uppermost sides of their natures. They were there to best each other by any manner of trickery. Each man understood that his neighbour was doing all he knew, nor did he resent it. Only would he resent it should the delinquent be found out. Then there would be real trouble. But they were all such old-time sinners. They had been doing that sort of thing for years, and would continue to do it for years more. It was the method of their lives, and Tresler had no opinion on the right or wrong of it. He had no right to judge them, and, besides, he had every sympathy for them as struggling units in Life's great battle.

But presently he left the table, for Fyles came in, and he had been waiting for him. But the officer came by himself, and Tresler asked him the reason.

"Well, you see, Nelson is outside, Tresler," the burly man said, with something like a smile. "He wouldn't come in. Shall we go out to him?"

The other assented, and they passed out. Joe was sitting on his buckskin pony, gazing at the saloon with an infinite longing in his old eyes.

"Why are you sitting there?" Tresler asked at once. Then he regretted his question.

"Wal," Joe drawled, without the least hesitation. "I'm figgerin' you oughter know by this time. Ther's things born to live on liquid, an' they've mostly growed tails. Guess I ain't growed that—yet. Mebbe I'll git down at Doc. Osler's. An' I'll git on agin right ther," he added, as an afterthought.

Joe smiled as much as his twisted face would permit, but Tresler was annoyed with himself for having forced such a confession from him.

"Well, I'm sorry I suggested it, Joe," he said quickly; "as

you say, I ought to have known better. Never mind, I want you to do me a favour."

"Name it, an' I'll do it if I bust."

The little man brightened at the thought of this man asking a favour of him.

Tresler didn't respond at once. He didn't want to put the matter too bluntly. He didn't want to let Joe feel that he regarded him as a subordinate.

"Well, you see, I'm looking for some one of good experience to give me some friendly help. You see, I've bought a nice place, and—well, in fact, I'm setting up ranching on my own, and I want you to come and help me with it. That's all."

Joe looked out over the market place, he looked away at the distant hills, his eyes turned on Doc. Osler's house; he cleared his throat and screwed his face into the most weird shape. His eyes sought the door of the saloon and finally came back to Tresler. He swallowed two or three times, then suddenly thrust out his hand as though he were going to strike his benefactor.

"Shake," he muttered hoarsely.

And Tresler gripped the proffered hand. "And perhaps you'll have that flower-garden, Joe," he said, "without the weeds."

"Mr. Tresler, sir, shake agin."

"Never mind the 'mister' or the 'sir,'" said Tresler. "We are old friends. Now, Fyles," he went on, turning to the officer, who had been looking on an interested spectator, "have you any news for Miss Marbolt?"

"Yes, the decision's made. I've got the document here in my pocket."

"Good. But don't tell it me. Give me an hour's start of you. I'm going to see the lady myself. And, Joe," Tresler looked up into the old man's beaming face. "Will you come with the sergeant when he interviews—er—our client?"

"All right, Mis——"

"No."

"Tresler, si——"

"No."

"All right, Tresler," said the old man, in a strangely husky voice.

* * * * *

Diane was confronting her lover for the last interview. Mrs. Osler had discreetly left them, and now they were sitting in the diminutive parlour, the man, at the girl's expressed wish, sitting as far from her as the size of the room would permit. All his cheeriness had deserted him and a decided frown marred the open frankness of his face.

Diane, herself, looked a little older than when we saw her last at the ranch. The dark shadows round her pretty eyes were darker, and her face looked thinner and paler, while her eyes shone with a feverish brightness.

"You over-ruled my decision once, Jack," she was saying in a low tone that she had difficulty in keeping steady, "but this time it must not be."

"Well, look here, Danny, I can give you just an hour in which to ease your mind, but I tell you candidly, after that you'll have to say 'yes,' in spite of all your objections. So fire away. Here's the watch. I'm going to time you."

Tresler spoke lightly and finished up with a laugh. But he didn't feel like laughter. This objection came as a shock to him. He had pictured such a different meeting.

Diane shook her head. "I can say all I have to say in less time than that, Jack. Promise me that you will not misunderstand me. You know my heart, dear. It is all yours, but, but—Jack, I did not tell all I knew at the inquest."

She paused, but Tresler made no offer to help her out. "I knew father could see at night. He was what Mr. Osler calls a—Nyc—Nyctalops. That's it. It's some strange disease and not real blindness at all, as far as I can make out. He simply couldn't see in daylight because there was something about his eyes which let in so much light, that all sense of vision was paralyzed, and at such time he suffered intense

pain. But when evening came, in the moonlight, or late twilight ; in fact at any time when there was no glare of light, just a soft radiance, he could not only see but was possessed of peculiarly acute vision. How he kept his secret for so many years I don't know. I understand why he did, but, even now, I cannot understand what drove him to commit the dreadful deeds he did, so wealthy and all as he was."

Tresler thought he could guess pretty closely. But he waited for her to go on.

"Jack, I discovered that he could see at night when you were ill, just before you recovered consciousness," she went on, in a solemn, awestruck tone.

"Ah !"

"Yes, while you were lying there insensible you narrowly escaped being murdered."

Again she paused, and shuddered visibly.

"I was afraid of something. His conduct when you were brought in, warned me. He seemed to resent your existence ; he certainly resented your being in the house, but most of all my attendance on you. I was very watchful, but the strain was too much, and, one night, feeling that the danger of sleep for me was very real, I barricaded the stairs. I did my utmost to keep awake, but foolishly sat down on my own bed and fell asleep. Then I awoke with a start ; I can't say what woke me. Anyway, realizing I had slept, I became alarmed for you. I picked up the light and went out into the hall, where I found my barricade removed——"

"Yes, and your father at my bedside, with his hands at my throat."

"Loosening the bandage."

"To ?"

"To open the wound and let you bleed to death."

"I see. Yes, I remember. I dreamt the whole scene, except the bandage business. But you——"

"I had the lighted lamp, and the moment its light flashed on him he was as—as blind as a bat. His hands moved about

your bandage fumbling and uncertain. Yes, he was blind enough then. I believe he would have attacked me, only I threatened him with the lamp, and with calling for help."

"Brave little woman—yes, I remember your words. They were in my dream. And that's how you knew what to do later on when Jake and he——"

The girl nodded.

"So Fyles was right," Tresler went on musingly. "You did know."

"Was I wrong, Jack, in not telling them at the inquest? You see he is dead, and——"

"On the contrary, you were right. It would have done no manner of good. You might have told me, though."

"Well, I didn't know what to do," the girl said, a little helplessly. "You see I never thought of cattle-stealing. It never entered my head that he was, or could be, Red Mask. I only looked upon it as a villainous attempt on your life, which would not be likely to occur again, and which it would serve no purpose to tell you of. Besides, the horror——"

"Yes, I see. Perhaps you were right. It would have put us on the right track though, as, later on, the fight with Jake and your action with regard to it, did. Never mind; that's over. Julian Marbolt was an utter villain from the start. You may as well know that his trading in 'black ivory' was another name for slave-trading. His blindness had nothing to do with driving him to crime, nor had your mother's doings. He was a rogue before. His blindness only enabled him to play a deeper game, which was a matter likely to appeal to his nature. However, nothing can be altered by discussing him. I have bought a ranch adjoining Mosquito Bend, and secured Joe's assistance as foreman. I have given out contracts for re-building the house; also, I've sent orders east for furnishings. I am going to buy my stock at the fall round-up. All I want now is for you to say when you will marry me, sweetheart."

"But, Jack, you don't seem to understand. I can't marry you. Father was a— a murderer."

"I don't care what he was, Danny. It doesn't make the least difference to me. I'm not marrying your father."

Diane was distressed. The lightness of his treatment of the subject bothered her. But she was in deadly earnest.

"But, Jack, think of the disgrace! Your people! All the folk about here!"

"Now don't let us be silly, Danny," Tresler said, coming over to the girl's side and taking possession of her forcibly. In spite of protest his arm slipped round her waist, and he drew her to him and kissed her tenderly. "My people are not marrying you. Nor are the folk—who by the way can't, and have no desire to throw stones—doing so either. Now, you saved my life twice; once through your gentle nursing, once through your bravery. And I tell you no one has the right to save life and then proceed to do all in their power to make that life a burden to the miserable wretch on whom they've lavished such care. That would be a vile and unwomanly action, and quite foreign to your gentle heart. Sweetheart," he went on, kissing her again, "you must complete the good work. I am anything but well yet. In fact I am so weak that any shock might cause a relapse. In short, there is only one thing, as far as I can see, to save me from a horrid death—consumption or colic, or some fell disease—and that's marriage. I know you must be bored to death by——No," as the girl tried to stop him, "don't interrupt, you must know all the fearsome truth—a sort of chronic invalid, but if you don't marry me, well, I'll get Joe to bury me somewhere at the cross roads. Look at all the money I've spent in getting our home together. Think of it, Danny; our home! And old Joe to help us. And——"

"Oh stop, stop, or you'll make me——"

"Marry me. Just exactly what I intend, darling. Now, seriously, let's forget the old past; Jake, your father, Anton, all of them—except Arizona."

Diane nestled closer to him in spite of her protests. There was something so strong, reliant, masterful about her Jack

that made him irresistible to her. She knew she was wrong in allowing herself to think like this at such a moment, but, after all, she was a weak, loving woman, fighting in what she conceived to be the cause of right. If she found that her heart, so long starved of affection, overcame her sense of duty, was there much blame? Tresler felt the gentle clinging movement, and pressed her for her answer at once.

"Time's nearly up, dearest. See through that window, Fyles and Joe are coming over to you. Is it marry, or am I to go to the Arctic regions fishing for polar bears without an overcoat? I don't care which it is—I mean—no. Yes, quick! They're on the verandah."

The girl nodded. "Yes," she said, so low that his face came in contact with hers in his effort to hear, and stayed there until the burly sergeant knocked at the door.

The policeman entered, followed by Joe. Tresler and Diane were standing side by side. He was still holding her hand.

"Fyles," Tresler said at once, beaming upon both men, "let me present you to the future Mrs. John Tresler. Joe," he added, turning on the little man who was twisting his slouch hat up unmercifully in his nervous hand, and grinning ferociously, "are the corrals prepared, and have you got my branding-irons ready? You see I've rounded her up."

The little man grinned worse than ever, and appeared to be in imminent peril of extending his torn mouth into the region of his ear. Diane listened to the horrible suggestion without misgiving, merely remarking in true wifely fashion—

"Don't be absurd, Jack!"

At which Fyles smiled with appreciation. Then he coughed to bring them to seriousness, and produced an official envelope from his tunic pocket.

"I've just brought you the verdict on your property, Miss Marbolt," he said deliberately. "Shall I read it to you, or would you——?"

"Never mind the reading," said Diane impulsively. "Tell me the contents."

"Well, I confess it's better so. The legal terms are confusing," said the officer emphatically. "You can read them later. I don't think the Government could have acted better by you than they've done. The property,"—he was careful to avoid the rancher's name—"The property is to remain yours, with this proviso. An inquiry has been arranged for, into all claims for property lost during the last ten years in the district. And all approved claims will have to be settled out of the estate. Five years is the time allowed for all such claims to be put forward. After that everything reverts to you."

Diane turned to her lover the moment the officer had finished speaking.

"And, Jack, when that time comes we'll sell it all and give the money to charity, and just live on in our own little home."

"Done!" exclaimed Tresler. And seizing her in his arms he picked her up and gave her a resounding kiss. The action caused the sergeant to cough loudly, while Joe flung his hat fiercely to the ground, and, in a voice of wildest excitement, shouted—

"Gee, but I want to holler!"

CHAPTER XXIV

ARIZONA

WHEN winter comes in Canada it shuts down with no uncertainty. The snow settles and remains. The sun shines, but without warmth. The still air bites through any clothing but furs, moccasins, or felt-lined overshoes. The farmers hug the shelter of their houses, and only that work which is known as "doing the chores" receives attention when once winter sets its seal upon the land. Little traffic passes over the drifted trails now; a horseman upon a social visit bent, a bob-sleigh loaded with cord-wood for the wood stoves at home, a cutter, drawn by a rattling team of young bronchos, as rancher and wife seek the alluring stores of some distant city to make their household purchases, even an occasional "jumper," one of those low built, red painted, one-horsed sleighs, which resemble nothing so much as a packing case with a pair of shafts attached. But these are all; for work has practically ceased in the agricultural regions, and a period of hibernation has begun, when, like the dormouse, rancher and farmer alike pass their slack time in repose from the arduous labours of the open season.

Even the most brilliant sunlight cannot cheer the mournful outlook to any great extent. Out on the Edmonton trail, several hundreds of miles to the north of Forks, at the cross roads where the Battule trail branches to the east, the cheerless prospect is intensified by the skeleton arms of a snow-crowned bluff. The shelter of trees is no longer a shelter against the

wind, which now comes shrieking through the leafless branches and drives out any benighted creature foolish enough to seek its protection against the winter storm. But in winter the cross roads are usually deserted.

Contrary to custom, however, it is evident that a horseman has recently visited the bluff. For there are hoof-prints on one of the crossing trails; on the trail which comes from somewhere in the foothills. The marks are sharp indentations and look fresh, but they terminate as the crossing is reached. Here they have turned off into the bush and are lost to view. The matter is somewhat incomprehensible.

But there is something still more incomprehensible about the desolate place. Just beyond where the hoof-prints turn off a lightning-stricken pine tree stands alone, bare and blackened by the fiery ordeal through which it has passed, and, resting in the fork of one of its shrivelled branches, about the height of a horseman's head, is a board—a black board, black as is the tree-trunk which supports it.

As we draw nearer to ascertain the object of so strange a phenomenon on a prairie trail we learn that some one has inscribed a message to those who may arrive at the crossing. A message of strange meaning and obscure. The characters are laboriously executed in chalk, and have been emphasized with repeated markings and an attempt at block capitals. Also there is a hand sketched roughly upon the board, with an outstretched finger pointing vaguely somewhere in the direction of the trail which leads to Battule.

“THIS IS THE ONE WAY TRAIL.”

We read this and glance at the pointing finger which is so shaky of outline, and our first inclination is to laugh. But somehow before the laugh has well matured it dies away, leaving behind it a look of wonder not unmixed with awe. For there is something sinister in the message, which, though we do not understand it, still has power to move us. If we

are prairie folk we shall have no inclination to laugh at all. Rather shall we frown and edge away from the ominous black board; and it is more than probable we shall avoid the trail indicated, and prefer to make a detour if our destination should chance to be Battule.

Why is that board there? Who has set it up? And "the one way trail"; the trail over which there is no returning. The message is no jest.

The coldly, gleaming sun has set, and at last a horse and rider enter the bluff. They turn off into the bush and are seen no more. The long night passes. Dawn comes again, and, as the daylight broadens, the horseman reappears and rides off down the trail. At evening he returns again; disappears into the bush again; and, with daylight, rides off again. Day after day this curious coming and going continues without any apparent object, unless it be that the man has no place but the skeleton bush in which to rest. And with each coming and going the man rides slower, he lounges wearily in his saddle, and before the end of a week looks a mere spectre of the man who first rode into the bluff. Starvation is in the emaciated features, the brilliant feverish eyes. His horse, too, appears little better.

At length one evening he enters the bush, and the following dawn fails to witness his departure. All that day there is the faint sound of a horse moving about amongst the trees with that limping gait which denotes the application of a knee-halter. But the man makes no sound.

As night comes on a solitary figure might be seen seated on a horse at a point which is sheltered from the trail by a screen of bushes. The man sits still, silent, but drooping. His tall gaunt frame is bent almost double over the horn of his saddle in his weakness. The horse's head is hanging heavy with sleep, but the man's great, wild eyes are wide open and alight with burning eagerness. The horse sleeps and frequently has to be awakened by its rider as it stumbles beneath its burden; but the man is as wakeful as the night owl seeking its

prey, and the grim set of his wasted face implies a purpose no less ruthless.

At dawn the position is unchanged. The man still droops over his saddle horn, a little lower perhaps, but his general attitude is the same. As the daylight shoots athwart the horizon and lightens the darkness of the bush to a grey twilight the horse raises his head and pricks up his ears. The man's eyes glance swiftly towards the south and his alertness is intensified.

Now the soft rustle of flurrying snow becomes audible, and the muffled pounding of a horse's hoofs can be heard upon the trail. The look that leaps into the waiting man's eyes tells plainly that this is what he has so patiently awaited, that here, at last, is the key to his lonely vigil. He draws his horse back further into the bushes and his hand moves swiftly to one of the holsters upon his hips. His thin, drawn features are sternly set, and the sunken eyes are lit with a deep, hard light.

Daylight broadens and reveals the barren surroundings; the sound draws nearer. The silent horseman grips his gun and lays it across his lap with his forefinger ready upon the trigger. His quick ears tell him that the traveller has entered the bush and that he is walking his horse. The time seems endless, while the horseman waits, but his patience is not exhausted by any means. For more than a week, subsisting on the barest rations which an empty pocket has driven him to beg in that bleak country, he has looked for this meeting.

Now, through the bushes, he sees the traveller as his horse ambles down the trail towards him. It is a slight fur-clad figure much like his own, but, to judge by the grim smile that passes across his gaunt features, one which gives the waiting man eminent satisfaction. He notes the stranger's alert movements, the quick, flashing black eyes, the dark features as he peers from side to side in the bush, over the edge of the down-turned storm collar; the legs which set so close to the saddle, the clumsily mitted hands. Nor does he fail to

observe the uneasy looks he casts about him, and he sees that, in spite of the solitude, the man is fearful of his surroundings.

The stranger draws abreast of the black sign-board. His sidelong glances cannot miss the irregular, chalked characters. His horse comes to a dead stand opposite them, and the rider's eyes become fixed upon the strange message. He reads; and while he reads his lips move like one who spells out the words he sees.

"This is the One Way Trail," he reads. And then his eyes turn in the direction of the pointing finger.

He looks down the trail which leads to Battule, whither the finger is pointing, and, looking, a strange expression creeps over his dusky features. Instinctively, he understands that the warning is meant for him. And, in his heart, he believes that death for him lies somewhere out there. And yet he does not turn and flee. He simply sits looking and thinking.

Again, as if fascinated, his eyes wander back to the legend upon the board and he reads and re-reads the message it conveys. And all the time he is a prey to a curious, uncertain feeling. For his mind goes back over many scenes that do him little credit. Even to his callous nature there is something strangely prophetic in that message, and its effect he cannot shake off. And while he stares his dark features change their hue, and he passes one mitted hand across his forehead.

There is a sudden crackling of breaking brushwood within a few yards of him; his horse bounds to one side and it is with difficulty he retains his seat in the saddle; then he flashes a look in the direction whence the noise proceeds, only to reel back as though to ward off a blow. He was looking into the muzzle of a heavy "six" with Arizona's blazing eyes running over the sight.

The silence of the bush remained unbroken as the two men looked into each other's faces. The gun did not belch forth

its death-dealing pellet. It was simply there, levelled, to enforce its owner's will. Its compelling presence was a power not easily to be defied in a country where, in those days, the surest law was carried in the holster on the hip. The man recovered and submitted. His hands, encased in mitts, had placed him at a woeful disadvantage.

Arizona saw this and lowered his gun, but his eyes never lost sight of the fur-clad hands before him. He straightened himself up in the saddle, refusing to display any of his weakness to this man.

"Guess I've waited fer you, 'Tough' McCulloch, fer nigh on a week," he said slowly, in a thin, strident voice. "I've coaxed you some too, I guess. You wus hidden mighty tight, but not jest tight 'nuff. I 'lows I located you, an' I wa'an't goin' to lose sight o' you. When you quit Skitter Bend, like the whipped cur you was, I wus right hot on your trail. An' I ain't never left it. See? Say, ther' ain't bin a move as you've took I ain't looked on at. I've trailed you, headed you, bin alongside you, an' located wher' you wus makin', an' come along an' waited on you. Ther's a score 'tween you an' me as wants squarin'. I'm right here fer to squar' that score."

Arizona's sombre face was unrelieved by any change of expression while he was speaking. There was no anger in his tone; just cold, calm purpose, and some contempt. Whatever feelings the half-breed may have had he seemed incapable of showing them, except in the sickly hue of his face.

The fascination of the message on the board still seemed to attract him, for, without heeding the other's words, he glanced over at the seared tree-trunk and nodded at it.

"See. Dat ting. It your work. Hah?"

"Yes; an' I take it the meanin's clear to you. You've struck the trail we all stan' on sometime, pardner, an' that trail is mostly called the 'One Way Trail.' It's a slick, broad trail, an' one as is that smooth to the foot as you're like to find anywheres. It's so dead easy you can't help goin' on, an' you on'y larn its cussedness when you kind o' notion gittin' back.

I 'lows as one o' them glacier things on top o' yonder mountains is li'ble to be easier climbin' nor turnin' back on that trail. The bed o' that trail is blood, blood that's mostly shed in crime, an' its surface is dusted wi' all manner o' wrong doin's sech as you an' me's bin up to. Say, it ain't a long trail, I'm guessin', neither. It's dead short, in fac' the end comes sudden-like, an' vi'lent. But I 'lows the end ain't allus jest the same. Sometimes y'll find a rope hangin' in the air. Sometimes ther's a knife jabbin' around; sometimes ther's a gun wi' a light pull waitin' handy, same as mine. But I figger all they things mean jest 'bout the same. It's death, pardner; an' it ain't easy neither. Say, you an' me's pretty nigh that end. You 'special. Guess you're goin' to pass over fust. Mebbe I'll pass over when I'm ready. It ain't jest nes'ary fer the likes o' us to yarn Gospel wi' one another, but I'm goin' to tell you somethin' as mebbe you're worritin' over jest 'bout now. It's 'bout a feller's gal—his wife—which the same that feller never did you no harm. But fust y'll put up them mitts o' yours, I sees as they're gittin' oneasy, worritin' around as though they'd a notion to git a grip on suthin'."

The half-breed made no attempt to obey, but stared coldly into the lean face before him.

"Hands up!" roared Arizona, with such a dreadful change of tone that the man's hands were thrust above his head as though a shot had struck him.

Arizona moved over to him and removed a heavy pistol from the man's coat pocket, and then, having satisfied himself that he had no other weapons concealed about him, dropped back to his original position.

"Ah, I wus jest sayin', 'bout that feller's wife," he went on quietly. "Say, you acted the skunk t'wards that feller. An' that feller wus me. I don't say I wus jest a daisy husband fer that gal, but that wa'an't your consarn. Wot's troublin' wus your monkeyin' around, waitin' so he's out o' the way an' then vamoosin' wi' the wench an' all. Guess I'm goin' to kill you fer that sure. But ther' ain't none o' the skunk to me. I'm

goin' to treat you as you wouldn't treat me ef I wus settin' wher' you are, which I ain't. You're goin' to hit the One Way Trail. But you ken hit it like what you ain't, an' that's a man."

Arizona's calm, judicial tone goaded his hearer. But 'Tough' McCulloch was not the man to shout. His was a deadlier composition such as the open American hated and despised, and hardly understood. He contented himself with a cynical remark which fired the other's volcanic temper so that he could scarcely hold his hand.

"I treat her decent," he said, with a shrug.

"Ah, you tret her decent, did you? You who knew her man wus livin'! You, as mebbe has haf a dozen wives livin'. You tret her decent. Wal, you're goin' to pay now. Savee? You're goin' to pay fer your flutter wi' chips, chips as drip wi' blood—your blood."

The half-breed shrugged again. He was outwardly unconcerned, but inwardly he was cursing the luck that he had been wearing mitts upon his hands when he entered the bluff. He watched Arizona as he climbed out of his saddle. He beheld the signs of weakness which the other could no longer disguise, but they meant nothing to him, at least, nothing that could serve him. He knew he must wait the cowpuncher's pleasure; and why? The ring of white metal which marks the muzzle of a gun has the power to hold brave man and coward alike. He dared not move, and he was wise enough not to attempt it.

Arizona drove his horse off into the bush, and stepped over to his prisoner, who still remained mounted, halting abreast of the man's stirrup and a few yards to one side of it. His features now wore the shadow of a grim smile as he paused and looked into the face which displayed so much assumed unconcern.

"See this gun," he said, drawing the fellow to the one he held in his right hand; "it's a forty-fi', an' I'm guessin' it's loaded in two chambers." Then he scraped the snow off a

small patch of the road with his foot. "That gun I lay right here," he went on, stooping to deposit it, but still keeping his eyes fixed upon the horseman. "Then I step back, so," moving backwards with long regular strides, "an' I reckon I count fifteen paces. Then I clear another space," he added grimly, like some fiendish conjurer describing the process of his tricks, "and stand ready. Now, 'Tough' McCulloch, or Anton, or wotever you notion best, skunk as you are, you're goin' to die decent. You're goin' to die as a gentleman in a square fought duel. You're goin' to die in a slap up way as is a sight too good fer you, but don't go fer to make no mistake—you're goin' to die. Yes, you're goin' to get off 'n that plug o' yours an' stand on that patch, an' I'm goin' to count three, nice an' steady, one—two—three! Just so. An' then we're goin' to grab up them guns an' let rip. I 'lows you'll fall first 'cause I'm goin' to kill you—sure. Say, you'll 'blige me by gittin' off'n that plug."

The half-breed made no move. His unconcern was leaving him under the deliberate purpose of this man.

"Git off o' that plug!" Arizona roared out his command with all the force of his passion.

And the man obeyed instantly. And it was plain now that his courage was deserting him. And in proportion his cunning rose. He made a pitiful attempt at swagger as he walked up to his mark, and his fierce eyes watched every movement of his opponent. And Arizona's evident condition of starvation struck him forcibly, and the realization of it suggested to his scheming brain a possible means of escape.

"You mighty fine givin' chances, mister," he said, between his teeth. "Maybe you sing different later. Bah! you make me laff. Say, I ready."

"Yes, git right ahead an' laff," Arizona replied imperturbably. "An' meanwhiles while you're laffin,' I'll trouble you to git out o' that sheep's hide. It ain't fit clothin' fer you noways. Howsum, it helps to thicken your hide. Take it off."

The half-breed obeyed and the two men now stood motionless. Arizona was an impressive figure in that world of snow. Never before had his personality been so marked. It may have been the purpose that moved him that raised him to something superior to the lean, volcanic cowboy he had hitherto been. His old slouching gait, in spite of his evident weakness, was quite gone; his shaggy head was held erect, and he gazed upon his enemy with eyes which the other could not face. For the time, at least, the indelible stamp of his disastrous life was disguised by the fire of his eyes and the set of his features. And this moral strength he conveyed in every action in a manner which no violence, no extent of vocabulary could have done. This man before him had robbed him of the woman he had loved. He should die.

His pistol was still in his hand.

"When I say 'three,' you'll jest grab for your gun—an' fire," he said solemnly.

He relapsed into silence, and, after a moment's pause, slowly stooped to deposit his weapon. His great roving eyes never relaxed their vigilance, and all the while he watched the man before him.

Lower he bent, and the pistol touched the ground. He straightened up swiftly and stood ready.

"One!"

The half-breed started, and a sharp spasm convulsed his body. Then he stood as though about to spring.

"Two!"

McCulloch moved again. He stooped with almost incredible swiftness and seized his gun, and the next moment two loud reports rang out, and he threw his smoking weapon upon the ground.

Arizona had not moved though his face had gone a shade paler. He knew he was wounded.

"Three!"

The American bent and seized his gun as the other made a dash for his horse. He stood up, and took deliberate aim.

The half-breed was in the act of swinging himself into his saddle. A shot rang out, the would-be fugitive's foot fell out of the stirrup, and his knees gave under him. Another shot split the air, and, without so much as a groan, the man fell in a heap upon the ground, while a thick red stream flowed from a wound at his left temple.

Then silence reigned once more.

After a while the sound of a slouching gait disturbed the grim peace of the lonely bluff. Arizona shuffled slowly off the road. He reached the edge of the bush; but he went no further. For he reeled, and his hands clasped his body somewhere about his chest. His eyes were half closed, and his face looked ghastly in the wintry light. By a great effort he steadied himself and abruptly sat down in the snow. He was just off the track and his back was against a bush.

Leaning forward he drew his knees up and clasped his arms about them, and remained rocking himself slowly to and fro. And, as he sat, he felt something moist and warm saturating his clothes about his chest. Several times he nodded and his lips moved, and his eyelids fell lower and lower until he saw nothing of what was about him. He knew it was over for him and he was satisfied.

He remained for some time in this attitude. Once he opened his eyes and looked round, but, somehow, he drew no satisfaction from what he beheld. The world about him seemed unsteady and strangely dark. The snow was no longer white, but had turned grey, and momentarily it grew darker. He thankfully reclosed his eyes and continued to nurse himself. Now, too, his limbs began to grow cold, and to feel useless. He had difficulty in keeping his hands fast about his knees, but he felt easy, and even comfortable. There was something soothing to him in that warm tide which he felt to be flowing from somewhere about his chest.

The minutes slipped away and the man's lips continued their silent movement. Was he praying for the soul which he knew to be passing from his body? It may have been

so. It may have been that he was praying for a girl and a man whom he had learned to love in the old days of Mosquito Bend, and who he was leaving behind him. This latter was more than likely, for his was not a selfish nature.

Again his eyes opened, and now they were quite unseeing ; but the brain behind them was still clear, for words, which were intelligible, came slowly from his ashen lips.

"It's over, I guess," he muttered. "Maybe life ain't wi'out gold for some. I 'lows I ain't jest struck colour right. Wal, I'm ready for the reckonin'."

His hands unclasped and his legs straightened themselves out. Like a weary man seeking repose he turned over and lay with his face buried in the snow. Nor did he move again. For Arizona had ended his journey over the One Way Trail.

THE END









